RASHTRAPATI BHAVAN
LIBRARY

Reg. No 705

Clas. No. VIII - N



PAUL VERLAINE

PAUL VERLAINE
BY HAROLD NICOLSON

Je suis venu, calme orphelin,
Riche de mes seuls yeux tranquilles,
Vers les hommes des grandes villes :
Ils ne m'ont pas trouvé malin.

A vingt ans un trouble nouveau,
Sous le nom d'amoureuses flammes,
M'a fait trouver belles les femmes :
Elles ne m'ont pas trouvé beau.

Bien que sans patrie et sans roi
Et très brave ne l'étant guère,
J'ai voulu mourir à la guerre :
La mort n'a pas voulu de moi.

Suis-je né trop tôt ou trop tard ?
Qu'est-ce que je fais en ce monde ?
O vous tous, ma peine est profonde.
Priez pour le pauvre Gaspard !

LONDON : CONSTABLE
& COMPANY LIMITED

925.84
VEL-N

SICUT OMNIA
VITAE SUAE
D.D.
H. N.

CONTENTS

		PAGE
I.	Youth	1
II.	Marriage	37
III.	Arthur Rimbaud	57
IV.	"Sagesse"	109
V.	Middle Age	149
VI.	The Last Phase	179
VII.	Verlaine's Literary Position	223

I

YOUTH

Malheureux ! Tous les dons, la gloire du baptême,
Ton enfance chrétienne, une mère qui t'aime,
La force et la santé comme le pain et l'eau,
Cet avenir enfin, décrit dans le tableau
De ce passé plus clair que le jeu des marées,
Tu pilles tout, tu perds en viles simagrées
Jusqu'aux derniers pouvoirs de ton esprit, hélas !
La malédiction de n'être jamais las
Suit tes pas sur le monde où l'horizon t'attire !
L'enfant prodigue avec des gestes de satyre !

I

1

It is not an easy thing to write a life of Paul Verlaine. It is not easy; and it is not quite necessary. The material is there, of course; vivid and, if you like it, sensational. The collected works are there; seven volumes of heterogeneous prose and poetry. There are the official biographies, friendly, discreet, and on the whole accurate; there are memoirs galore, kind or unkind references scattered throughout the writings of the period, and behind it all a great fund of floating memories both in France and England. But the subject has been worn threadbare. For those who care for French literature the facts of Verlaine's life are abundantly familiar. For those who do not care, the story may appear merely unpleasant or even deleterious. Although there exists no Anglo-Saxon monograph on the life and works of Paul Verlaine, it is questionable therefore whether to put down in English what has been done so adequately by Lepelletier and Delahaye may not, after all, be a gratuitous undertaking. The thing can be little else than a picture, more or less sympathetic, of a character

failing consistently to cope with the rudiments of a social conscience, of a nature despicable by all current standards, of a life-story which is apt to pall in its monochrome of vice and futility. Even from a strictly literary point of view Verlaine is somewhat of a back number, a plaintive miscellany thumbed only by the eighteen-nineties; an influence indirect rather than vital, a habit and an atmosphere rather than a directive force.

And thus, as one reads the guarded testimony of others, or the jaunty revelations of Verlaine himself, one feels that it is but a thankless task to disinter these forgotten and fugitive scandals, that it were better done, perhaps, to leave the Verlaine of most Anglo-Saxons as a vague and suffering figure, apprehended only through his few successful poems or in the facile ditties of Reynaldo Hahn.

Perhaps this is so: but, if so, there are other reasons which may justify this monograph. In the first place, Verlaine, however diffused and indefinite his present influence, stood during his lifetime in a quite unique relation to the movements of French literature. He was born during the Romantic period, his first writings were composed under the aegis of the Parnassiens, and in his later years he reflected and inspired the impulses of the Symbolists and the Decadents. There is no one who illustrates more vividly the currents and cross-currents which swayed French poetry between the 'sixties and the 'nineties; there is no biography which can equal his as an introduction to the French literature of

to-day. In the second place, Verlaine, who was so un-French by temperament, may find some honour, some fresh facet of forgiveness, among us broader and less conventional Anglo-Saxons. And finally, and perhaps predominantly, there is Rimbaud—the fierce schoolboy who stalked through Verlaine's middle youth, and passed on to Africa flinging behind him a scattered handful of indignant writings, by which French literature, even to-day, is rendered tremulous.

There is one further matter, which requires a more specific apology, or at least an explanation. I had hoped at first to give in an appendix a translation of the poems quoted in the text; but I have abandoned this project. Verlaine of all poets is too elusive to admit of translation, and above all of a literal translation into English prose. So the quotations stand as in the original: and after all it is not of much importance. Some of his best poems were christened "Songs without Words." Their charm is less a question of meaning than one of tune.

2

Paul Marie Verlaine was born at Metz on March 30, 1844. The house where this significant event took place is now marked by a commemorative tablet, and stands close to the famous esplanade, a wide terrace looking out over the lush poplars of

the Moselle Valley. Behind this esplanade and around the pink cathedral clusters the old French town of Metz, little changed since Verlaine's childhood, and beyond it stretch the trim and ugly quarters of the German occupation. The house was at that time numbered No. 2 rue Haute Pierre, subsequently and for forty-eight years Hochsteinstrasse 2, and now again, triumphantly, No. 2 rue Haute Pierre. The Verlaines were not indigenous to Metz: their sojourn there was a purely fortuitous incident necessitated by the fact that Paul's father was at that date quartered in the town with his regiment. In after years, when it had become interesting and significant to be a native of one of the sundered provinces, Verlaine made much of his Messin origin. At the age of fifty, even, he wrote a patriotic, almost an imperialist, ode to Metz which did much to rehabilitate not only Verlaine himself but also the volume of *Invectives* in which it was inserted. But the chance of his having been born in Lorraine had but little real effect either upon his temperament or upon his life. It is not to Metz or to Lorraine that we must look for any indications of hereditary characteristics, but to the Franco-Belgian frontier in the Ardennes. Verlaine's forebears originated in the villages between Bouillon and Paliseul north of Sedan, a district which since 1815 had been included in Belgium. An attempt has been made by enthusiastic biographers to provide him with a noble origin and to trace his family back to certain

somewhat hazy "De Verlaines" who appeared in Belgium during the early sixteenth century. These researches are well intentioned but not very convincing. Had any such romantic tradition hovered about his family Verlaine himself would certainly have disinterred it: so good an opportunity to add a note of the picaresque to his already overcharged biography would not have been omitted during those long nights when he sat in bed writing his *Confessions*. But he makes no mention of it, and we can be content therefore to define his forebears as a stock of yeomen of northern rather than of southern antecedents, established for many generations among the farms and villages of the Ardennes.

Paul Verlaine's grandfather had been a small country-town notary, and his father, who had been born in 1798, was for a few years employed in the family business. It was a time, however, when the great wave of Napoleonic romance was sweeping with it the whole youth of the country, and in its wake the young Ardennais was caught up from his father's office and out into the campaigns of 1814 and 1815. He emerged from the general collapse to find his home, the old department of "Les Forêts," incorporated at first in Holland and then in Belgium, and was obliged to opt himself back into French nationality. Thus both Verlaine's father and himself were French only by option, a fact which, except in his more emotional moments, did not awake in Verlaine any particular comment or reflection. At the time when Paul appeared as

a member of the household his father was already forty-six years of age, and had worked himself up laboriously from the ranks of the " Grande Armée " to a captaincy in the 2nd Engineers; it was in this position that he was serving at Metz when Paul so unexpectedly consented to be born.

Verlaine has, in his *Confessions*, written fifty-one years later, given a sympathetic but unconvincing picture of his father. He is represented as a stern and strict disciplinarian, a man of huge stature and resplendent uniform, on which glittered among others the medal of the Trocadero. The little we know of him does not, however, fully bear out this virile picture. Lepelletier, who met him when Verlaine was at the Lycée Bonaparte, says quite frankly that he was " au fond papa gâteau." We may well believe it; we know that he lost half his wife's fortune in speculating in the Crédit Mobilier and the Seville-Cadiz Railway; we know that he threw up his profession in petulance at being superseded; we know that he died from falling downstairs; we know also that when Verlaine was at school his father would come to see him every day for eight years with cakes and chocolates in his pocket. Irritable he may have been and probably was (there is a story somewhere of his throwing an omelette out of the window), but it is doubtful whether he ever exercised over this only child of his middle age that firm discipline which Paul, even from his tenderest years, must so persistently have needed.

Verlaine's mother comes to us as a much more convincing personage. A brisk, tidy, affectionate and rather silly figure, she had a capacity for self-sacrifice and devotion which, had it been stiffened with a little dignity, a little prudence even, might have entitled her to exist as one of the legendary types of motherhood. She appears, however, to have suffered from a weakness of character almost as fluid as that of Paul himself, and to have incessantly condoned where she should have insisted, or giggled where she should have disapproved. The result, after many years of suffering and defeat, was a sad degradation of her position; a squalid life with her son in which on both sides there was much affection but no respect. Like his father, Verlaine's mother came from the north—from the Pas de Calais. Her home was in the village of Fampoux, near Arras, and her maiden name had been Eliza Dehée. Her people were in easy circumstances and Madame Verlaine had brought her husband a quite respectable dowry. Most of this Captain Verlaine proceeded to lose by speculation and the remainder was to be flung to the four winds by the tempest of her son's adventures, the last few francs going, not unfittingly, to the cost of her own funeral. In addition to his father and mother, Verlaine's home circle was graced by a girl cousin, eight years older than himself, whom Madame Verlaine had adopted at a time when the prospect of any Paul arriving appeared doubtful. This cousin Eliza filled the part of an elder, and

too indulgent, sister to Verlaine, and in fact it was she who handed him her meagre savings when he was in difficulties over the publication of his first volume of poems. She passes early out of Verlaine's life, marrying a sugar manufacturer at Douai, and dying soon afterwards in childbirth. A poignant passage in Verlaine's *Confessions* tells of how, on hearing of her illness, he had travelled to Douai only to arrive too late, and how in his misery he slouched down to the nearest inn and drank without thinking for three whole days and nights.

So much, therefore, for the birth and origins of Paul Verlaine. For those who like to believe in heredity it is possible to show that in his veins ran the rude health and impulses of his yeomen forebears, that in his nature there mingled the gentle mists of the Pas de Calais and the forests and waters of the Ardennes. It is undeniable at least that Verlaine must have possessed a constitution of quite remarkable endurance, and that, as regards his temperament, he was more nebulous, more northern, more "Belgian," than he was Ile de France. Of more importance, however, is the fact that he was an only and rather unpremeditated child: that his father was forty-six and his mother thirty-four at the time of his arrival: that he was adored and petted by both his parents as being the unexpected product of a period when they had become resigned to childlessness; and finally that the enervating and feminine atmosphere of his home was increased by the presence of a girl cousin

who was to live with the family throughout Verlaine's childhood.

Verlaine says nothing of all this in his *Confessions*. He recounts a few indolent stories of his childhood: how he nearly swallowed a scorpion, how he put his hand into boiling water, and how when four years of age he remembered the Proclamation of the Republic at Montpellier and the first unfamiliar notes of the Marseillaise. He tells also, with the relish of his fifty-one years, of his first childish love affair upon the esplanade at Metz, where he met and sighed for a child called Mathilde, to the amusement of both their parents and of Marshal Niel, who was then but a Colonel and in command of the Metz garrison.

3

In 1851, when Verlaine was seven years old, his father threw up his commission in disgust and left Metz for Paris. It was his intention to live quietly there on his private income, and for that purpose he found a small flat on the second story of No. 10 rue St. Louis, now rue Nollet, in the Batignolles quarter, a district then, as now, much favoured by retired military officers. Verlaine has left a picture of the first arrival of himself and his family in Paris—a picture of a little mid-Victorian boy sobbing to himself in a cab, at the great disillusion of a rain-sodden city in place of the gilded Babylon

of his imagination. In a week or two the furniture arrived from Metz and the family settled down to the task of coping with their son's education. Verlaine's father appears to have had some inkling that the child was becoming spoilt and wilful, and to have realised that the only hope was to remove him drastically from the enervating influence of the home circle. A somewhat unusual decision, this, for a French bourgeois family to take, but Captain Verlaine seems to have possessed his son's predilection for coping with difficult situations by flying off at a tangent. In any case the decision was probably a wise one, although it did not materially strengthen Verlaine's character or free him from that subservience to others which was to prove his ruin.

Paul was sent first to a child's school in the rue Hélène, but he contracted there a serious fever, of a nature not specified, through which he was nursed by his cousin and mother. On his recovery he was sent to the Institution Landry, rue Chaptal, on the site, approximately, of the present Grand Guignol theatre, from where he was eventually to follow the courses of the Lycée Bonaparte. The first night of his stay at the Institution he ran home, but was taken back there on the following morning with many exhortations "to be a man, and to remember that school was something like a regiment." This advice seems for the moment to have stimulated Paul, since he did not again run home to the rue St. Louis, but settled down quite

happily to the noise, the chatter, and the usual petty squalors of a private school. It was at the Institution Landry that he received his earliest education, and it was there that he prepared for his first communion. He states, with some pride, in his Autobiography that his first communion was a "good" one and that his general confession had been scrupulous. The day following his first communion, however, he passed from the ranks of the "petits" to those of the "moyens," or, as we should say, he ceased to be a lower boy. This entailed his regular attendance at the Lycée Bonaparte, now the Lycée Condorcet, the "public school" of Verlaine's existence. It is noticeable that after one year of public school life he refused to go to confession or to celebrate the anniversary of his first communion. By the age of thirteen, therefore, the religious influence of home life had been obliterated, and the advent of puberty found him without any external support.

Verlaine was happy, it seems, at the Lycée Bonaparte, where he remained until he was over eighteen years of age. He was, as may have been expected, defective at mathematics ("Oh that rule of three!" he exclaims forty years later), but adequately good at "rhetoric" and English. His masters do not seem to have taken any particular interest in him, or he in them; his English master, Mr. Spiers, is the only one for whom he retained any affection. In general he appears to have been a perfectly ordinary pupil: a little lazy perhaps;

a little dirty probably; and a little superficial. Verlaine has recounted with great relish in his *Confessions* how between the ages of twelve and thirteen he was "assailed by vice." I do not think we need take this very seriously. The age of puberty is apt to be disconcerting and with some one of Verlaine's excessive temperament it is often dangerous. But so long as drink was absent Verlaine was always to remain a mild and docile creature. He was not, and never could be, a "révolté"; there is nothing of the young Shelley about Verlaine: on the contrary, a rather ordinary, rather timid French schoolboy, and one who at the age of eighteen obtained his degree at the Sorbonne, like other ordinary French schoolboys, without brilliance but quite creditably.

4

In general, therefore, Paul Verlaine's childhood and schooldays had little effect upon his future development. The factor which above all others was to prove decisive in that development was alcohol, and until he was eighteen the potency of this temptation had not assailed him. Certain elements, however, emerge from his school life which are of considerable importance. There is his friendship with Edmond Lepelletier, his junior by two years, who was to prove a real anchor in the storms to follow. Lepelletier was an intelligent,

bracing and affectionate person, who alone of Verlaine's early friends was to stick by him through the scandals of his middle years. In the biography which he published after Verlaine's death there is a vignette of how they had first become acquainted. There had been a French essay to do and Verlaine had somewhat ostentatiously produced his in verse. Instead of the applause which he had expected he was severely snubbed by the master, but this humiliating incident had at least the merit of awaking the sympathy and admiration of Edmond Lepelletier. Stimulated by the glow of this encouragement Verlaine continued to write verses which he showed to his enthusiastic friend, and from this emerged between the ages of sixteen and eighteen many of the *Poèmes saturniens* and some even of the *Fêtes galantes*. But it was not writing alone which occupied the two friends at this period; they encouraged each other to read voraciously. Verlaine has told how one day he found a tattered edition of the *Fleurs du mal* lying about in the class-room, and how he absorbed it with the relish of forbidden fruit. He did not understand it, of course, and in fact for years he remained under the impression that it was called the *Fleurs de mai*, but he absorbed from it a quite definite sense of suggestiveness and cadence. Later on he discovered on the quays a cheap edition of Banville's *Cariatides*, which encouraged in him his developing predilection for tortuous phraseology. A great favourite also at this time,

and indeed all his life, was Madame Desbordes Valmore, a poetess of real lyrical power who is now scarcely read. Apart also from this more specialised reading was the whole mass of Romantic literature from Petrus Borel to Hugo, and the more legitimate studies of the French classics. Some chance incident, also, appears to have fired him with an interest in Spanish literature, and a definite admiration for Calderon, but the decisive influences in these early readings were to come from Verlaine's own generation, with the publication of Catulle Mendès' *Philomela* and the *Vignes folles* of Albert Glatigny.

The year 1862, therefore, found Verlaine, at the age of eighteen, having taken his degree, written a few poems, read much and superficially, and as yet immune from the temptations of his later years. He was about to plunge into the world of Parisian literature, into a world, that is, which was beginning to react reverently but with determination against the religion of the Romanticists. The peculiar condition of French literature at this period will, in its due place, require, however, some further elaboration.

5

So soon as Verlaine had seen his own name among the successful candidates posted in the Sorbonne, he left at once for the country to recover

from the strain of the examination. He went to his mother's family, the Dehées, at Fampoux, not far from Arras, in fact all too near to that then prosperous city. During this, his first independent, sojourn, however, Verlaine did not allow his footsteps to lead him too often to the town, but lay all day in the fields or in a small wood near the Dehées' farmhouse, reading and dreaming beneath the wide and wind-swept skies of the Pas de Calais. In September he returned to Paris to find that his father had already been endeavouring to secure him a profession. At first Verlaine was to study Law, but he very soon realised that he had no aptitude for so exact a calling. He was thereupon employed for a month or two as a clerk in the Sun and Eagle Insurance Company, and in the meantime took lessons to improve his handwriting. Before the year was out, however, he had tired of this employment also, and his father, some of whose friends were in touch with the all-powerful Baron Haussmann, succeeded through the influence of that Minister in obtaining a post for Verlaine in the Hôtel de Ville. Thus at the age of eighteen Verlaine, as so many French poets, from Coppée to Albert Samain, became one of the large army of French Civil Servants and was to remain so for a period of eight years, which period was, on the whole, to prove the happiest of his life.

In the *Confessions* Verlaine, who had at that time to live up to his own irresponsible legend, tries to indicate that he had been an insubordinate

and unprofitable civil servant. This is certainly not the case: Verlaine was a docile creature, who throughout his life cheerfully accepted all and any discipline so long as it was sufficiently rigid as to become inevitable. He was to like prison discipline and hospital discipline, and even, when there was some one to enforce it, the discipline of the Church. The only kind of discipline he could not envisage was self-discipline, and all through his life we find him seeking from outside that authority which he could not evolve from his own will.

With this his peculiar temperament we may well assume that Verlaine was happy in the ordered curriculum of his office. His immediate chief, M. Guy, appears, it is true, to have himself been not only amiable but efficient, a combination which is apt to induce indolence in official subordinates, and we may well believe that in the later years of his short career the luncheon interval became unduly protracted. Lepelletier, indeed, speaks of Verlaine spending most of his time in scribbling caricatures and verses, and then dashing out bareheaded to the Café du Gaz, leaving his hat upon the office peg to attest his presence. Be this as it may, it is a fact that Verlaine rose quite quickly in the ranks of the Hôtel de Ville and that within four years he had been promoted, his salary reaching £160 a year, a sum which, considering his youth and the scale of wages at that time, proves at least that he was an averagely steady worker.

In 1866 Verlaine's father died, and from that date

onwards he lived alone with his all too indulgent mother. At that time Madame Verlaine must have had an income of some £250 a year, which enabled her son to live at home for nothing and to spend his official salary upon his own so deleterious amusements. An unfortunate arrangement this, since it gave Verlaine the impression of being far richer than he actually was, and led him into a variety of temptations to which he invariably and increasingly succumbed. Not that his tastes were ever extravagant in the sense of being eclectic: on the contrary, his preferences were consistently towards the coarser forms of indulgence, and this proletariat faculty constitutes, in a sense, the only permanently virile element in his character. As he himself confesses in the "Ballade de la mauvaise réputation," he was the type of Trimalcion rather than that of Lucullus.

6

At the beginning of 1866 Verlaine thus found himself in a not unenviable position. He was twenty-one, he had plenty of money, robust health, an adoring mother, regular work which was not uncongenial, and behind it all the consciousness of a genius slowly but surely developing, of great technical mastery in a medium which drained the bitterness from his rare troubles, and at gayer moments sent his heart soaring with the knowledge of accom-

plishment and creation. He had friends also at this happy period, respectable friends, socially and intellectually his equals; men and women who could understand his verses and who themselves were carving out the new French Renaissance which was to arise from the ashes of Romanticism. The nucleus of what was so soon to become the "Parnassus" was already by 1864 grouping around the strange figure of Xavier le Ricard and his distinguished and wizened little mother. At their flat at No. 10 Boulevard des Batignolles gathered all the literary youth of Paris. Catulle Mendès, François Coppée, Sully-Prudhomme, the already somewhat grim figure of Anatole France, Heredia, Villiers de l'Isle Adam, Lepelletier and a host of others. Xavier le Ricard was himself a curious personality, an advanced Republican, at once aristocratic and violent, who after an adventurous life, during which he founded an agricultural settlement in Paraguay and was imprisoned for Republicanism under Napoleon III., was to end his career as curator of the Museum at Azay le Rideau. Verlaine appears never to have been quite at home with these serious and enthusiastic people. While they shouted politics and declaimed their verses, he remained silent, or endeavoured plaintively to induce them to act charades. Although the le Ricard salon was important as forming the nucleus of the new Parnassus, Verlaine found a far more congenial atmosphere in the Bohemian and easy-going circle of Nina de Callias.

This brisk and excessive little person, who was to end her days in an asylum, was the daughter of a Lyons solicitor, and had inherited a considerable fortune. She lived with her mother and a monkey in a flat, 17 rue Chaptal, where she kept a noisy but generous establishment to which all Bohemia was welcome. "Chez Nina" became indeed a sort of club, where Verlaine could play the buffoon to his heart's content, and where people could be shouted down if they became serious.

A closer and more technical circle was within the year to form around the shop of the young publisher Lemerre in the Passage Choiseul. It was there that the young Parnassiens would gather of an afternoon and discuss the means and methods of their impending triumph:

> Les passages Choiseul aux odeurs de jadis,
> Oranges, parchemins rares,—et les gantières!
> Et nos "débuts," et nos verves primesautières,
> De ce Soixante-sept à ce Soixante-dix.

Poor Verlaine, how bitterly in after years was he to regret the happiness of those irresponsible days! The regular employment at his office, the café concerts, the light operas, for which he would be given tickets by a friend in the orchestra, the Sundays out at Meudon, the flattering sensation of being taken quite seriously at le Ricard's, the delightful certitude that no one would want to take him seriously Chez Nina; the joy of putting all this into verse which slipped so easily into a

strangely personal cadence; the companionship of it all, clean, healthy companionship with Edmond Lepelletier and Charles de Sivry, friendships a little more emotional and a little less healthy with Lucien Viotti, and his cousin Georges Dehée; the willing admiration of his mother, the holidays with books and paper in his beloved Pas de Calais or up in the Ardennes, the jokes, the letters and the laughter. "Qu'il était bleu le ciel, et grand l'espoir!"—but in that serene sky already hung a cloud no bigger as yet than a man's hand, but soon to overspread the whole, carrying with it rain and tempest and shipwreck.

As a schoolboy Verlaine does not appear to have shown many signs of dipsomania. He began to drink seriously when he was at Fampoux in the autumn of 1862, and from that date he indulged continuously and increasingly until "ce jour de juin où j'étais soucieux" in 1870 when Mathilde Mauté first swam into his ken and reformed him, for a year at least. The rest of his life is the history of a continual struggle against drink in general and absinthe, "that atrocious green sorceress," in particular, ending in the final collapse after 1886. Out of these wild indulgences emerged about this time that strange imp of violence which was ever to haunt the mild, the affable, the cowardly Verlaine in his moods of insobriety, and already in 1864 there is a story of his pursuing Edmond Lepelletier with a sword-stick among the matutinal shrubbery of the Bois de Boulogne.

7

For the moment, however, the ravages of absinthe were not to affect his literary output. By the time he was twenty-two Verlaine had revised and completed the *Poèmes saturniens* and most of those of the *Fêtes galantes*. Both these collections were composed under the white banner of the Parnassiens, that strange galley on which the young Verlaine was so surprisingly to be embarked. The literary school which in 1866 grouped itself under the title of the "Parnasse Contemporain," represented in its essence a reaction against the bankrupt methods of the Romanticists. As a destructive force the work of the Romanticists had already been accomplished by 1835; as a creative literature Romanticism had died with the failure of the *Burgraves* in 1843; having imposed itself as a heresy, Romanticism had not the vitality to survive as a doctrine. The very exaggeration, the coloured over-statement to which it owed the triumph of 1830, carried with them the germs of subsequent decay. By the middle of the century Romanticism ceased either to shock, to astonish or to please: only its absurdities remained, and when once realised these jarred irritatingly upon the milder eighteen-fifties. The younger generation turned their minds to a different and more impassive form of expression. This new literature was to be calm rather than

sensational, impersonal rather than passionate. The Romanticists had subordinated beauty to personality; the Parnassiens would make beauty the main tenor of their celebrations. The Romanticists had been impulsive, full-blooded and fluent, yes, so terribly fluent; the Parnassiens would be remote, ascetic and reserved. Victor Hugo, over there on his island, was of course a great and remarkable figure: he was the father of all poetry; he was the martyr of republicanism; he had genius; he had force; he would always remain the master. Yes, "le père Hugo" stood alone; and in the circumstances it was better, it was far better, that he should remain so. Another Hugo would be impossible, a school of Hugo's imitators would be disastrous. One would get "inspiration" without genius, fluency without style, emotion without reality. The master himself had produced *Les Orientales* as out of a machine; supposing that somebody else, supposing a whole school of somebodies, were to catch the secret of that machine? There would be no limit, no order; there would be chaos. The French love of design reacted against such a prospect, and the Parnassiens were already there to voice the reaction. No! the new school would be exclusive, it would be scholarly, and it would be difficult. Inspiration of course there must be if people would insist on it, but there would be limits, there would be rules, above all there would be "craftmanship." The *jardin anglais* of Romanticism had got out of hand: it

was the task of the new Parnassus to trim the hedges. And in all this they succeeded admirably.

This movement was, of course, not a sudden discovery of the year 1862, but had raised its head the moment the ranks of Romanticism were given a breathing-space after the battles of 1830. There are signs of it in Alfred de Vigny, in Alfred de Musset, in Hugo even. The whole doctrine is fully foreshadowed in Gautier's *Émaux et camées*, while its real originator was Théodore de Banville, whose *Cariatides* had been published as early as 1842. It was only after 1864, however, that these tendencies were co-ordinated under a definite banner and with a clear programme. Xavier le Ricard, who had endeavoured, without success, to launch a periodical entitled *Art*, induced the young publisher, Alphonse Lemerre, to issue an anthology of the new school of poets under the title *Le Parnasse contemporain*. It was this title which gave to the school their name of "Parnassiens," although they themselves would have preferred some more recondite label such as "les impassibles," "les formalistes," or "les stylistes." This anthology, which appeared in March 1866, created a considerable sensation. It was read in the cafés and the boudoirs: it penetrated even to the provinces: it made a great many people quite unnecessarily angry. It led to a duel between Paul Arène and Catulle Mendès: it led to Verlaine hitting Alphonse Daudet in the back as he was leaving a restaurant. It led also to a series of the most brilliant and

bitter attacks upon the Parnassiens generally and individually, which were published by Barbey d'Aurevilly in the *Nain jaune*. Among Verlaine's contributions was "Mon rêve familier," the famous poem which was so soon to figure in the *Poèmes saturniens*. D'Aurevilly seized upon this to ridicule Verlaine as a "Baudelaire puritain." "He says somewhere," writes d'Aurevilly in his *Médaillonet* on Verlaine, "that somebody 'had the inflexions of those loved voices which are now hushed.' When one hears M. Paul Verlaine one wishes that he also had caught and retained that peculiar inflexion."

These attacks, not unjustified in their way since they centred on the lack of feeling and inspiration which was always to be the weakness of the Parnasse, had at least the great merit of advertisement. The collection had, as Verlaine says, a "joli succès d'hostilité." But although the main contributors to the anthology, Leconte de Lisle, Heredia, Coppée, Sully-Prudhomme, Verlaine, Mallarmé, Villiers de l'Isle Adam and Anatole France, thereby became known to the French reading public, the school scarcely lived up to the success of its first manifesto. A second edition appeared in 1869 but fell flat, and another in 1876, from which Verlaine was excluded, since he was no longer fit company for so respectable a gathering. But by then the school was already dissolving, its members striking out with timid individuality. Its influence, however, continued to linger on long

after its disappearance, and in fact its chief monument, the *Trophées* of Heredia, published in 1892, was to be, in so far as the Parnasse was concerned, a purely posthumous triumph. It is, in fact, through the *Trophées* that the Parnassien theory can best be appreciated. Some of the poems in this volume are extremely good: all are characteristic, and one contains a line, perfect in itself, which is emblematic of the absurdity of the whole theory:

L'Éléphant triomphal foule des primevères.

8

The publication of the *Parnasse contemporain* had brought Verlaine into touch with the young publisher Lemerre, who the same year (1866) agreed to print the *Poèmes saturniens*, for which Verlaine, or rather his cousin Eliza, was to find the capital. The volume appeared at the same time as François Coppée's *Reliquaire*, but neither publication excited the least attention. As is customary with French poets, Verlaine sent copies of his work to all his friends and acquaintances as well as to the leading literary figures of the period. From his friends he received encouragement and congratulation, as well as a series of kind, if patronising, letters from contemporary celebrities. Théodore de Banville wrote asserting that he had read the volume ten times without stopping; Sainte-

Beuve, who obviously *had* read the verses, advised Verlaine to be more objective and not to take "poor old Baudelaire" as a model. Somewhat hard this upon Verlaine, who, in the *Poèmes saturniens*, had really tried to be objective, and had failed only partially. Victor Hugo, on the other hand, always lavish of his praise and his superlatives, wrote from Guernsey in the sense that his (Victor Hugo's) "sunset" saluted his (Verlaine's) "dawn." All this was very satisfying, particularly the last, which, although Verlaine did not take it too seriously, encouraged him next year to visit Hugo at Brussels. With characteristic tact Hugo proceeded to quote some of Verlaine's verses from memory, which manœuvre did not, however, prevent the latter from referring to him later as a simple little man "with small beady eyes which have remained brilliant and have become crafty."

The poems collected by Verlaine under the title of the *Poèmes saturniens* comprise partly such of his schoolboy efforts as he had not already destroyed, and partly poems written during the four years he had been at the Hôtel de Ville. The whole volume, therefore, covers the first eight years of Verlaine's literary life, and for this reason contains many experiments in different manners. There is a long and uninteresting poem entitled "Nocturne parisien," which is in date the earliest of any of Verlaine's publications; there are experiments in the objective manner, such as "César Borgia" and "La Mort

de Philippe II" ; there are recollections of Baudelaire and Hugo ; and over it all is hoisted, not wholly with conviction, the fresh standard of the Parnassus. In spite of their mixed character, Verlaine has in all these poems tried very hard to be Parnassien. So loyal was he to the new doctrine of impersonality, that he decided at one time to exclude from the volume the poem beginning "Les petits ifs du cimetière," which might have been taken as a personal reference to the recent death of his father. But in the better poems—and the whole volume contains some of the best that Verlaine ever wrote—he is carried away by the lilt of his own music, and the Parnasse is forgotten in the plaintive cadence of his curious lyricism :

Tout suffocant
Et blême, quand
Sonne l'heure,
Je me souviens
Des jours anciens
Et je pleure ;

Et je m'en vais
Au vent mauvais
Qui m'emporte
Deça, delà,
Pareil à la
Feuille morte.

Verlaine was at this time untouched by any real emotion, and yet these poems equal in poignancy any that were to be wrung out of him by the real tragedies and tribulations of the future. Nor is this surprising. The strange mechanism of his sensitory faculties were syntonised only to the currents

of secondary emotions. To the deeper currents of feeling his nerves, as so often with the artistic temperament, failed to respond. And hence the minor key of most of his melodies, and the avoidance of the octaves and diapasons of more important poetry. He knew this well enough himself. In later years he was to clamour for "la nuance encore, rien que la nuance," but even at this date he admits that "le grandiose échappe à ma dent." When he tries to sing under the stress of real emotion his voice cracks—it becomes "aigre et fausse."

The *Poèmes saturniens* are memorable also for the light they throw upon Verlaine's character at this period, in which we can clearly trace the lines of future disastrous development. He forecasts for himself, as one of those unfortunates whose birth has fallen beneath the planet Saturn,

> Bonne part de malheur et bonne part de bile,
> L'Imagination, inquiète et débile,
> Vient rendre nul en eux l'effort de la Raison.

Even the more subtle sides of his nature are apparent; his extreme dependence; his continual desire to rely on some calm, strong nature; on some one who would love and understand and forgive; on some one who would act as the fly-wheel to his intermittent will-power; on some one who would treat him as a wise mother treats a sickly child, some one "qui vous baise au front comme un enfant." Already he felt himself too weak to cope with his own nature; already he

foresaw that his soul "pour d'affreux naufrages appareille." In a famous poem, in the form of which the influence of Baudelaire is predominant, Verlaine evokes the vision of this calm and wise companion who is to keep his errant footsteps in the path of virtue:

Je fais souvent ce rêve étrange et pénétrant
D'une femme inconnue, et que j'aime, et qui m'aime,
Et qui n'est, chaque fois, ni tout à fait la même
Ni tout à fait une autre, et m'aime et me comprend.

Car elle me comprend, et mon cœur, transparent
Pour elle seule, hélas! cesse d'être un problème.
Pour elle seule, et les moiteurs de mon front blême,
Elle seule les sait rafraîchir en pleurant.

Est-elle brune, blonde ou rousse?—Je l'ignore.
Son nom? Je me souviens qu'il est doux et sonore
Comme ceux des aimés que la Vie exila.

Son regard est pareil au regard des statues,
Et, pour sa voix, lointaine, et calme, et grave, elle a
L'inflexion des voix chères qui se sont tues.

All this intimacy was taking Verlaine very far from the cold austerity of the Parnassus, and he had made matters worse by those tricks of versification and syntax which were to be so characteristic of his later style. His "curious felicity" for placing words in a verse, such as the soft thud of the "feuille morte" at the end of the Chanson d'Automne, his love of inverted diction, such as "la spontanéité craintive des caresses," were not likely to attract the scholarly susceptibilities of the earnest young Parnassiens. The poems contained,

it is true, an adequate number of Parnassien shibboleths: there were Raghû, Ganga, Bhagavat, and the Koh-i-Nor; there were Theroldous, Olivier and Turpin; there were Sardanapalus, Heliogabalus and Phidias; there were the Guadarrama, and the Escorial; there was even the condor, a bird which always exercised an irresistible attraction over the gloomy formalists of the Parnassien movement. All this was well enough—but it could not explain away lines of such flippant irregularity as—

> Elle parle—et ses dents font un miroitement—
> Italien, avec un léger accent russe.

Verlaine felt that he must somehow put himself right with his own school, and so he composed an epilogue, in which the Parnassien theories, which his own poems had somehow failed to illustrate, should at least be stated and explained. He explains them very well:

Ce qu'il nous faut à nous, les Suprêmes Poètes . . .
A nous qui ciselons les mots comme des coupes
Et qui faisons des vers émus très froidement, . . .
Ce qu'il nous faut, à nous, c'est, aux lueurs des lampes,

La science conquise et le sommeil dompté.
C'est le front dans les mains du vieux Faust des estampes, . . .
C'est la nuit, l'âpre nuit du travail, d'où se lève
Lentement, lentement, l'Œuvre, ainsi qu'un soleil!

But it was not work alone which made the true Parnassien, it was detachment: it was a strict avoidance of "le moi haïssable." Verlaine refers pityingly to the poor poets of the school of

"inspiration," who become elegiac by the side of lakes (a hit at Lamartine this and at Wordsworth), and who abandoned their selves and their secrets to the chance winds :

> Libre à nos Inspirés, cœurs qu'une œillade enflamme,
> D'abandonner leur être aux vents comme un bouleau :
> Pauvres gens ! l'Art n'est pas d'éparpiller son âme :
> Est-elle en marbre, ou non, la Vénus de Milo ?

9

This "excudent alii" was to remain a mere statement of theory, and was not, fortunately, to be translated into practice. Having launched his question regarding the composition of the Venus of Milo, Verlaine prudently decided that it would be more interesting to write about himself. Before, however, definitely breaking with the Parnassiens, he wrote one really impersonal volume, a series of sketches of the French eighteenth century, which were not published until 1869. If regarded purely as an evocation of the eighteenth century the *Fêtes galantes* are not successful. Verlaine was too modern, too animal, too *canaille*, to catch the necessary atmosphere. He knew little about the eighteenth century : a Sunday or two at Versailles ; the Fragonards in the Louvre ; Hugo's *Fête chez Thérèse*—such, rather than any appreciation of the past manners, is the foundation of the poems. Their inspiration, moreover, can be

traced directly to the Goncourts and Albert Glatigny. As purely decorative writing, however, the *Fêtes galantes* are in their way unique. What could be better, of its sort, than the following ?

Votre âme est un paysage choisi
Que vont charmant masques et bergamasques,
Jouant du luth et dansant et quasi
Tristes sous leurs déguisements fantasques.

Tout en chantant sur le mode mineur
L'amour vainqueur et la vie opportune,
Ils n'ont pas l'air de croire à leur bonheur
Et leur chanson se mêle au clair de lune,

Au calme clair de lune triste et beau,
Qui fait rêver les oiseaux dans les arbres
Et sangloter d'extase les jets d'eau,
Les grands jets d'eau sveltes parmi les marbres.

The whole volume contains pieces of rare skill, such as "Les Coquillages" and "Les Indolents," and some of gentle beauty, such as "En Sourdine" and "Les Ingénus." Even the passages in which Verlaine fails to catch the tender dignity of the eighteenth century are not without a certain personal charm: they show what Anatole France has called "son ingénuité troublante, avec je ne sais quoi de gauche et de grêle." It is in the *Fêtes galantes*, moreover, that Verlaine's mastery of cadence is at its most perfect:

A Clymène

Mystiques barcarolles,
Romances sans paroles,
Chère, puisque tes yeux,
Couleur des cieux,

Puisque ta voix étrange
Vision qui dérange
Et trouble l'horizon
De ma raison,

Puisque l'arome insigne
De ta pâleur de cygne
Et puisque la candeur
De ton odeur,

Ah ! puisque tout ton être,
Musique qui pénètre,
Nimbes d'anges défunts,
Tons et parfums,

A sur d'almes cadences
En ses correspondances
Induit mon cœur subtil,
Ainsi soit-il !

In after years Verlaine could equal but never surpass the skill with which the lilt of this song is carried onward.

Even as the *Poèmes saturniens* had closed with a little puff of incense to the Parnassus, so the *Fêtes galantes* are concluded by two admirable poems in tribute to the personal manner. Both " En Sourdine " and the " Colloque sentimental " are as good bits of writing as Verlaine ever achieved, but for the moment it is necessary only to draw attention to them as showing how even among the " masques et bergamasques " of the *fêtes galantes* it is in the sweep of the personal violin that Verlaine finds his true function.

The publication of the *Fêtes galantes* closes the first chapter of Verlaine's literary history. Although he was not as yet sure of himself, he had at least

secured complete mastery over his own material: although he had not yet secured either fame or fortune, and although, compared to his contemporary, François Coppée, he was already rather the black sheep of the Parnassus, yet there were people even then who were beginning to detect in his poems a strange and troubling note, a note as yet unheard in French literature. But meanwhile the shadow of his besetting sin was stealing steadily over the sunlight of his genius and his youth: what Mr. Enoch Soames would have called the "Sorcière glauque" was never absent. Poor Madame Verlaine cajoled and wept and squabbled; but night after night Paul would return with that metallic glint in his green eyes, his gentle voice rasping into shrill petulance, and in its wake the flame of violence and the crash of broken crockery.

But now comes *La Bonne Chanson*.

II

MARRIAGE

Un vaste et tendre
Apaisement
Semble descendre
Du firmament
Que l'astre irise. . . .
C'est l'heure exquise.

II

1

ANATOLE FRANCE has recounted somewhere how Verlaine in those early Parnassien days, terrified at his own inability to resist the approaching spectre of dipsomania, and at a moment when, after a whole day of absinthe, his flaming brain was declining from the apex of stimulation to the valley of remorse, reeled one late afternoon into the cool of a Paris church, and beating loudly on the confessional clamoured for a priest. "I am a penitent," he screamed, "I have come to confess, I have come for absolution!" and then followed a stream of foul language covering an enforced exit into the evening sunshine.

The story, if not historical, is at least characteristic. It was in a similar panic at his own weakness that he clutched at the poor child who was to be his wife. It was with the same impulse that in his prison cell four years later he was to fling himself sobbing on his knees before the image of the Sacred Heart.

One evening in June 1869, when Verlaine had come to visit his friend Charles de Sivry at his

home in the rue Nicolet, the conversation of the two young men was interrupted by three timid knocks upon the door; and there, smiling and a little shy, stood de Sivry's half-sister, the schoolgirl Mathilde Mauté, hesitating at her own intrusion. "Don't go," cried Charles de Sivry, "this is M. Verlaine—the poet." Oh yes, of course, and she liked poets, and her brother had spoken to her of Monsieur Verlaine; she had read his poetry too, some of it, but they were rather difficult, some of them, and now she had better be going. A mere child—poor thing, she was but sixteen years of age—but in Verlaine's troubled heart this simple schoolroom scene, the child with her light gown and charming patter, flamed into the proportions of a great adventure, of a sunlit aspiration.

En robe grise et verte avec des ruches,
Un jour de juin que j'étais soucieux,
Elle apparut souriante à mes yeux
Qui l'admiraient sans redouter d'embûche.

Elle alla, vint, revint, s'assit, parla,
Légère et grave, ironique, attendrie :
Et je sentais en mon âme assombrie
Comme un joyeux reflet de tout cela.

The effect was immediate; and that very evening when he met Charles de Sivry again at the Café du Delta, the latter observed to his astonishment that Paul had lost his usual gaiety, that he drank no absinthe, but toyed pensively with the illustrated papers. A few days later Verlaine left Paris for Fampoux, and over him still hung the atmosphere of self-control and renouncement given him by

that sudden picture of a child in a doorway. For days he wandered about the fields and the woods of that clear-aired northern country, fishing sometimes, reading often; but for the most part dreaming of new and calmer horizons. One afternoon, however, he was obliged to walk to Arras: the road was long and dusty, and the first glass of beer led to another, and with them the whole scaffolding of renunciation came clattering down. By midnight, as his tottering steps led him to the station for the return to Fampoux, there was not a café in Arras which he had not visited. The first rays of dawn woke Verlaine from his heavy slumber; the fumes of drink had cleared, and in their place crashed upon him the terror of this new relapse. In a second he was out of bed and writing in desperate haste to Charles de Sivry, to ask him for the hand of Mathilde Mauté. The letter once written Verlaine ran from the house, through the still slumbering village; and not till the missive was stamped and posted beyond recall did he return to bed, sleeping then till noon with the facile reaction of a weak nature that has burnt its boats.

The days of suspense which followed were agony, but the reply when it arrived was not unsatisfactory. The Mautés were poor and had two daughters. Madame Verlaine was known to have a little money, which would go to her son, and the latter might also inherit from vague aunts at Fampoux. Moreover, Verlaine, in spite of his

satanic appearance, was after all a Civil Servant, a quality which to the lower middle class in France covers a deficiency of the less palpable virtues. His request was not rejected in principle; but Mathilde was so young: they had seen each other so little: it would be better if nothing were to be settled at present: Mathilde was being taken to Normandy, and meanwhile the couple could, if they wished, correspond. They could correspond openly, and in addition Charles de Sivry was there to forward supplementary letters if required. It was from these letters that springs the clear spontaneity of the *Bonne Chanson*.

2

To the Anglo-Saxon mind it may seem ridiculous and unreal that Verlaine should have fallen thus in love with a schoolgirl whom he had only seen for a few seconds. It may strike some of us as slightly grotesque that he should have desired all at once to translate so vague a stirring of emotion into definite and irremediable action. Such a conclusion, however, would overlook French psychology in general and Verlaine's own strange temperament in particular. To the average Frenchman love is a far more diffused, a far more cerebral, and in truth a far more idealised business than it is with us more sensual Northerners. For them love is an abiding purpose and an unceasing occupation; it is desirable in the abstract; it is all-important as

a wholly impersonal habit of mind; it is perpetual and not intermittent; it is the crown and glory of manhood; it is the whole sunshine of life; it is the only possible expression of physical thanksgiving. The average Frenchman is born in love with love, and it requires but the slightest spark of personality to set the whole ablaze. From this aspect, at least, Verlaine was wholly French. "J'ai la fureur d'aimer," he cries. "Qu'y faire? Ah! laisser faire." Moreover, there are other and more personal circumstances which render the *Bonne Chanson* the most sincere of all Verlaine's poems. Acutely sensitive by nature, he had felt terribly the repulsion which his forbidding exterior aroused in women. Mathilde had not winced when she first met him: she had been shy, a little coy even; but she had not winced. In the first place, therefore, she had been kind and gentle, she had soothed his wounded vanity. In the second place, she was to be the haven, the helper, the guardian angel. This was the dawn of a new life; the old struggles and disappointments were to fall behind him:

C'en est fait à présent des funestes pensées,
C'en est fait des mauvais rêves, ah! c'en est fait
Surtout de l'ironie et les lèvres pincées
Et des mots où l'esprit sans l'âme triomphait.

Arrière aussi les poings crispés et la colère
A propos des méchants et des sots rencontrés;
Arrière la rancune abominable! arrière
L'oubli qu'on cherche en des breuvages exécrés!

.

Oui, je veux marcher droit et calme dans la Vie,
Vers le but où le sort dirigera mes pas,
Sans violence, sans remords et sans envie.
Ce sera le devoir heureux aux gais combats.

Soothed and protected by this gentle presence against the arrows of the world and his own vices, his life would become studious, benign, domestic :

Le foyer, la lueur étroite de la lampe ;
La rêverie avec le doigt contre la tempe
Et les yeux se perdant parmi les yeux aimés ;
L'heure du thé fumant et des livres fermés ;
La douceur de sentir la fin de la soirée.

Verlaine was afraid, terribly afraid, of his own temperament ; he was anxious, terribly anxious, to reach the calm of self-discipline. It was Mathilde who would enable him to conquer the one and to achieve the other. Let us not, therefore, take the *Bonne Chanson* as anything but a sincere poem, and let us welcome in this spirit the love poetry which it contains :

Avant que tu ne t'en ailles,
Pâle étoile du matin,
— Mille cailles
Chantent, chantent dans le thym.

Tourne devers le poète,
Dont les yeux sont pleins d'amour,
— L'alouette
Monte au ciel avec le jour —

Tourne ton regard que noie
L'aurore dans son azur,
— Quelle joie
Parmi les champs de blé mûr ! —

Puis fais luire ma pensée
Là-bas, bien loin, oh ! bien loin !
— La rosée
Gaîment brille sur le foin —

Dans le doux rêve où s'agite
Ma mie endormie encor . . .
— Vite, vite,
Car voici le soleil d'or ! —

The well-known poems, " L'Heure exquise " and " Offrande," which figure in Reynaldo Hahn's collection of *Chansons grises*, both belong to this period, although the latter was not included in the *Bonne Chanson* but published later, under the title of " Aquarelles : Green," in the *Romances sans paroles*.

When once Mathilde had safely been sent off to Normandy, Verlaine himself returned to Paris, but to a new life of regular attendance at his office, and of abstention from drink and low company. We find him accompanying his mother to pay visits on the old ladies of her acquaintance. We find him less negligent even about his clothes ; we find him almost clean. And every night there was that letter to be sent to Mathilde out there among the orchards of Normandy. The whole period was tremulous and delicate, but as the weeks passed Verlaine began to become restless : this enforced absence and abstinence were becoming trying. " Oh ! Absence ! " he exclaims, " the least clement of all human ills." It was all very well to be able to write letters and to send her poems. But how did he know that at the moment he was pouring out his sadness into verse, Mathilde

might not be thinking of other things, might even, perhaps, oh horror ! be smiling. The suspense was becoming intolerable, but at last these weary weeks of separation were drawing to their end. The Mautés were returning to Paris.

La dure épreuve va finir :
Mon cœur, souris à l'avenir.

A formal interview was arranged between the two lovers. Verlaine was shy and uncomfortable in the new clothes that his mother had brushed so carefully ; but the ice was soon broken, and all through that calm winter of 1869 Verlaine was to live in happy anticipation of these evening visits :

Hier, on parlait de choses et d'autres,
Et mes yeux allaient recherchant les vôtres ;

Et votre regard recherchait le mien
Tandis que courait toujours l'entretien.

3

It had been arranged that Paul and Mathilde should marry in the spring of 1870, but Providence appears to have endeavoured at the last moment to prevent this so disastrous marriage. A few weeks before the intended date Mathilde Mauté fell ill with smallpox, and Verlaine's anxiety was such that he overcame his natural cowardice and went to visit her, a frail voice in a darkened room. On her recovery the marriage was fixed for June, but hardly had Verlaine's spirits begun to revive when Madame Mauté in her turn fell ill with the same

sickness. This time the marriage was fixed for the month of August, and Verlaine, who was by then on the verge of a nervous breakdown, was sent off to stay in the country with Madame de Manaury, a cheerful *déclassée* whom he had known "Chez Nina."

Again the days passed with leaden feet, but at last there came the second week in July, and with it the date of his return to Paris. As he drove from the station, happy in his own preoccupations and excited by the approaching reunion, he scarcely noticed the unwonted effervescence of the boulevards, the crowds and shouting at the street corners. Poor futile Verlaine! he had not been reading the papers out at Argentan. He returned to find that France was at war.

His first impulse was a burst of fury that such people as Louis Napoleon, Eugénie, and that still cryptic von Bismarck, should interfere with his own projects and happiness.

Nous sommes en des temps infâmes,

he exclaims, and then, on the heels of his indignation, the ghastly thought, "Will he, Paul, be called upon to fight?"

He flew at once to Mathilde, who stilled his tribulation: of course he would not have to fight; he was the son of a widow, and her sole support. Verlaine was comforted and grateful:

J'allais par des chemins perfides,
Douloureusement incertain.
Vos chères mains furent mes guides.

So calm again returned to poor Verlaine, but not for long. Three days before his marriage, when he was sitting quietly in the Hôtel de Ville, one of his friends, Lambert de Roissy, burst into the room, announced his intention of committing suicide, flung a letter on the table, and ran from the building. So soon as he had recovered from his astonishment, Verlaine rushed after him, but he had disappeared. The letter, when opened, contained de Roissy's final dispositions and wishes, but no address. The next day Verlaine received a telegram from de Roissy telling him to go at once to an address in Passy; but it was too late: Verlaine on his arrival found his friend dead, with a bullet through his forehead. The following day was spent, with the assistance of Anatole France, in arranging for, and eventually attending, his friend's funeral. In the evening he returned to Paris in a state of acute nervous tension. The city was alive with rumours. There had been a decisive battle; the French had won a great victory; a whole Prussian Army had been captured; the German Crown Prince was being brought a prisoner to the capital. As he passed the Café de Madrid a group of his friends sitting on the terrace hailed him: they were in a state of great excitement. People were saying that the rumours of victory were premature, that they were exaggerated, even that they were untrue; that in fact it was the French and not the Prussian Army that had been beaten. As Verlaine sat there (a little stimulant to recover his shattered nerve,

and after all to-morrow he was to marry), the excitement in the streets assumed a different character. The news was passing from mouth to mouth. The French Armies had been shattered on the Rhine, and were streaming back to defend Paris. The crowd eddied around the café: some one began to sing the Marseillaise, and suddenly Verlaine, in his cracked falsetto, shouted, "Long live the Republic!" By that time the police were on the scene, and the young poet was seized as one of the instigators of the disturbance. But the crowd hustled round to his support, and Verlaine, freed from the hands of Imperial authority, escaped by a side street, and flung himself panting into another café, where he seized a newspaper to cover his confusion. Suddenly from the sheet he was reading the following words danced before his eyes:

> All unmarried men of the Class 1844–45, who have not already enlisted, are immediately to join the colours.

The whole world swam before him: here at the eleventh hour was the final blow to his hopes of regeneration. In a panic he rushed round to the rue Nicolet, where Mathilde again succeeded in lulling him to reason. After all the banns had been published, and this by itself would exclude him from the scope of that cruel order.

Mathilde was right in her opinion. On the next day the marriage was duly solemnised at Notre Dame de Coulaincourt.

4

The newly married pair settled in a flat at No. 2 rue du Cardinal Lemoine, the corner house, down there by the quays, with Notre Dame reflected in the water below them. But public events were not for long to allow them to enjoy their happiness. Within a few weeks the news came that the French Armies, and the Emperor with them, had surrendered to the Prussians, and that the latter were about to invest Paris. Verlaine was not a patriotic person. In fact, when he was first told that the Germans might enter the capital he exclaimed: "Why, at last we shall have some good music." Nor was he very brave. But he appears at this juncture to have been fired by the general excitement of the moment. In an impulse of martial ardour he enlisted in the National Guard and was allotted to the southern sector of the Paris fortifications between Issy and Montrouge. He never pretended that this burst of patriotism was more than a whim. In *Louise Leclercq*, a short story which he published in his later life, and which is largely autobiographical in character, he characterises his impulse at that moment as "more or less superficial—the fun of playing at soldiers." His service in the defence of Paris, however motived, was to have a most unfortunate effect upon his personal circumstances. With his peculiar facility for becoming intimate only with his intellectual

inferiors, Verlaine was at once on the easiest of terms with his fellow-soldiers, and in such conditions the only form of social expression is the interchange of liquor. Those long, hot autumn days on the shadowless fortifications played havoc with his new-found sobriety, and hardly a week had passed before he lurched home one evening in a state which even the innocent Mathilde could not but recognise as one of advanced intoxication. Verlaine was always irritated if people said he was drunk; and Mathilde appears to have welcomed him that evening with a shower of tears and accusations:

Et vous gesticulez avec vos petits bras
Comme un héros méchant,
En poussant d'aigres cris poitrinaires, hélas!
Vous qui n'étiez que chant!

Car vous avez eu peur de l'orage et du cœur
Qui grondait et sifflait,
Et vous bêlâtes vers votre mère—ô douleur! —
Comme un triste agnelet.

Et vous n'avez pas su la lumière et l'honneur
D'un amour brave et fort.

That night poor little Mathilde left the flat at rue Cardinal Lemoine and took refuge with her parents at the rue Nicolet. And next day when Verlaine came round to see her, she forgave him, but with a light in her eyes of half amusement and half contempt, under which the frail roots of the "amour brave et fort" dried up and withered. From this day on, while the Prussians surrounded

Paris with a ring of iron, their life became a series of outbreaks punctuated by reconciliations, and the calm which Verlaine had longed for left his heart for ever.

> Je suis le doux par excellence, mais tenez,
> Ça m'exaspère, et je le dis à votre nez,
> Quand je vous vois l'œil blanc et la lèvre pincée,
> Avec je ne sais quoi d'étroit dans la pensée,
> Parce que je reviens un peu soûl quelquefois.
>
>
>
> Être soûl, vous ne savez pas quelle victoire
> C'est qu'on remporte sur la vie, et quel don c'est !
> On oublie, on revoit, on ignore et l'on sait ;
>
>
>
> C'est une espèce d'autre vie en raccourci.

With the early spring there came peace and on the heels of peace the Commune. Verlaine, as has been indicated already, was not a politician ; but he liked excitement. With the advent of the Commune he found that his friends Rigault, Andrieu, Vermesch and Meillet had suddenly become people of authority and importance. It was very astonishing ; it was above all enormous fun. Schoolboy as he always was, Verlaine allowed his colleagues in the Hôtel de Ville to slink out to Versailles and M. Thiers, while he flung himself gaily into the tattered and irresponsible ranks of the Communist administration. The final horrors of the Commune have left so cruel a mark on the French conscience that it is hard to work back to the days when it was a young if somewhat roistering experiment. Even Lepelletier, who was himself a Communist, tries hard to explain away Verlaine's part in that

black chapter of French history; he attributes Verlaine's omission to join M. Thiers at Versailles to the "settled habits of a bureaucrat," to Verlaine's own dislike of changing his residence. To the English mind the Commune is not necessarily so disgraceful an episode, and we can well believe that Verlaine, with his sensational temperament, thoroughly enjoyed the whole business. For a certain period he worked under the Communists in his old office, but was shortly appointed by his friends the Director of the Press Bureau. Lepelletier here again goes to great pains to prove that Verlaine was not the actual director of this bureau, and that his only function therein was to mark with a blue pencil the passages in the Press where reference was made to the Communist administration. It appears, however, that Verlaine was actually in charge of the Press Censorship Department, and that he caused all the serious and respectable papers, the *Débats* and the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, to be summarily suppressed. In after life Verlaine used to fit his accounts of this period to his audience. At one time he would make out that he had had nothing to do with the Commune; at another that he had been all-important. He certainly told the Goncourts on one occasion that it was his influence alone which had saved Notre Dame from destruction.

Whatever may have been Verlaine's part in the Commune, his panic at its collapse was certainly not simulated. When Paris was retaken by the

Versaillais on May 24, Verlaine, who had already sent his wife to stay with her family, shut himself up in a back closet, and refused even to go out on to the balcony to see the smoke hanging over Paris, or the silhouette of Notre Dame rising black against the flames of his own office in the Hôtel de Ville. Lepelletier, who arrived at this moment to take refuge in Verlaine's flat, has given a somewhat painful description of Verlaine's moral collapse at this juncture; of his anxiety to get rid of so compromising a visitor. While Lepelletier was still there, Verlaine's mother arrived, having left her home in Montmartre the day previously, and having spent the whole night in trying to pass from barricade to barricade among the flames and corpses. Finally, Mathilde herself came round to see whether Paul had survived the disturbances, and Lepelletier was able to escape owing to the fortunate chance that his old regiment happened to pass along the quay below them.

Verlaine was so terrified by these events, and by the executions and wholesale denunciations that followed upon the re-establishment of order, that he refused to return to his office and was never, indeed, again to set foot within it. He went to hide with his wife's family in the rue Nicolet, and spent most of his now too superfluous moments in falling back into his old habits of continuous drinking. In the summer he was able no longer to bear the anxiety of a possible denunciation, and fled with his wife to the secure retreat of Fampoux. A

few last weeks of calm were vouchsafed to him during this brief respite from his temptations, and some renewal of the old relations was caused by the discovery that his wife had conceived a child. In September of that year the Verlaines returned to Paris, where they rather foolishly decided again to live with Mathilde's parents at No. 15 rue Nicolet. But Verlaine was again drinking, and with his insensate love for scenes and reconciliations, the calm atmosphere of the Mauté household was disturbed by the outbreaks of his increasing irritability. Like so many weak characters, he would endeavour to fix on others the blame for his own delinquencies. His wife was lacking in understanding; she had failed to appreciate his "simplicity"; she had failed to cope with his artistic temperament.

"Vous n'avez pas eu toute patience," he complains. "Vous n'avez pas eu toute douceur." He had expected so much of her, and she had failed. Her failure was worse than a deception; it was treason.

And then there was her father, M. Mauté, with his gold pince-nez and his side-whiskers, the personification of a limited provincialism, of the coarse-grained obtuseness of the middle classes. The family meals in that Mauté household during those autumn months of 1871 cannot have been very edifying. The condition of Mathilde's health, and the fact that it was his own child whose presence rendered her so nervous, had no effect upon

Verlaine. She was there to protect him, not he to protect her. And so he would arrive of an evening, a tell-tale light in his eyes, and whatever subject was raised would lead to a discussion with M. Mauté, a discussion would develop into an argument, an argument into a scene, accompanied by the tears of Mathilde and not seldom by the crash of flying plates. Verlaine himself has left a vivid picture of the sort of thing that went on, in his sketch "Les Bons Bourgeois," published in *Les Mémoires d'un veuf*. Madame Mauté alone appears to have been able at times to ride upon this whirlwind, and Verlaine, to do him justice, always retained for her a certain feeling of gratitude. He describes her as the only woman with whom he never quarrelled, and only a few months before he died, his memory floated back to her, and he addressed to her the ode of gratitude which begins:

Vous fûtes douce et bonne en nos tristes tempêtes.

In spite of this, however, the situation was inherently impossible, and could in any case not have continued. The solution, however, when it came was to be sensational. For in October of that year the sinister figure of Arthur Rimbaud loomed on the threshold of the rue Nicolet.

III

ARTHUR RIMBAUD

La nuit, l'amie, oh la lune de miel
Cueillera leur sourire et remplira
De mille bandeaux de cuivre le ciel.
Puis ils auront affaire au malin rat.

A. RIMBAUD.

III

I

ARTHUR RIMBAUD, " ange et démon," was not yet seventeen when he first came into Verlaine's life. He had been born at Charleville on October 20, 1854, at No. 12 rue Napoleon, subsequently re-christened rue Thiers. His father, who was an officer in the Army, did not live with his mother, who appears indeed to have been a hard and disagreeable woman, and one who endeavoured to curb the cruel truculence of her son by the application of an even more cruel discipline. Rimbaud has given a picture of the relations between his mother and himself in the verses entitled " Les Poètes de sept ans " :

Et la Mère, fermant le livre du devoir,
S'en allait satisfaite et très fière sans voir,
Dans les yeux bleus et sous le front plein d'éminences,
L'âme de son enfant livrée aux répugnances.

Tout le jour, il suait d'obéissance ; très
Intelligent ; pourtant des tics noirs, quelques traits
Semblaient prouver en lui d'âcres hypocrisies.
Dans l'ombre des couloirs aux tentures moisies,
En passant il tirait la langue, les deux poings
A l'aine, et dans ses yeux fermés voyait des points.

At seven years old, therefore, he was already morose, precocious and ungovernable; already the mania of "Wanderlust" had seized upon his senses:

> A sept ans, il faisait des romans sur la vie
> Du grand désert où luit la Liberté ravie,
> Forêts, soleils, rives, savanes! . . .

At an early age he was sent to school at Charleville, where his masters, and particularly the master of rhetoric, M. Izambard, were quick to recognise that such precocity, straining in the hurricane of a wild and inhuman nature, must argue either genius or lunacy. Poor M. Izambard, he was to share the fate of all those who interested themselves in Rimbaud: he was to be exploited, robbed and laughed at, and then, when no longer useful, to be flung cynically aside. But in his case the connexion with Rimbaud was not without an eleventh-hour compensation, since in later years it was to give the function and the glory of an impresario to what would otherwise have been the colourless middle age of a provincial schoolmaster.

By the time Rimbaud was fifteen he had read practically all that Charleville could offer, and was determined at any cost to acquire wider horizons. He had already composed a score of curious, if unpleasant, poems; some genre pictures in the Dutch manner; some sonnets of an already developed paganism:

> Je regrette les temps de l'antique jeunesse,
> Des satyres lascifs, des faunes animaux, . . .

Je regrette les temps où la sève du monde . . .
Dans les veines de Pan mettaient un univers.

There were verses also, such as the "Bal des pendus," in the *macabre* manner of Baudelaire, and in "Venus Anadyomène" rings out already the cruel jarring of Rimbaud's demoniacal laughter. But all this was not enough: Charleville had become too small to hold his flaming arrogance. The kindly encouragement of M. Izambard, the conscientious interest of the other masters, were intolerable to Rimbaud, whose most consistent hatred was that of human charity. He announced to his family that he had decided to leave school, that he had abandoned all desire of obtaining a University degree. His mother, with her usual decision, immediately locked him up in a garret, but he managed to escape. And then began that wild and syncopated Odyssey which in its course was to ruin poor Verlaine's brittle little life, and to drive Rimbaud himself hungrily across Europe, and out into the wilds of Central Africa.

On September 3, 1870, at the moment when, not so very far from there, Louis Napoleon was engaged on surrendering France to Graf von Bismarck, Rimbaud slouched down to the station at Charleville, and taking a ticket for the next station on the line, proceeded, under the seat, to travel to Paris. At the Gare du Nord he was discovered and arrested. He refused sulkily to give either his name or his references. His strange appearance, his Ardennais accent, aroused at that

neurasthenic moment the gravest suspicions. Rimbaud was at once imprisoned in Mazas, on the vague charge of vagabondage. After twelve days he consented to give his name, his address and the reference of M. Izambard. By then, however, the Prussians had cut the lines to the Ardennes, and Rimbaud was accordingly sent to M. Izambard at Douai, from where he eventually found his way back to Charleville.

On his return his mother gave him so fierce, so vindictive, a welcome, that he at once escaped again. Without a penny in his pocket he walked across the Belgian frontier to Charleroi, where he endeavoured, without success, to obtain employment on a local paper. Leaving Charleroi he tramped through Belgium and Eastern France without food or covering until at last he was arrested by the gendarmes and returned, half starved, to Charleville. On this occasion his mother was frightened by his lamentable condition: little was said about this second escapade, and from October 1870 to February 1871 Rimbaud consented to remain at home. The time was spent in reading and writing, in drinking, in quarrelling with his friends and family, and in other occupations equally deleterious:

> Elle était fort déshabillée,
> Et de grands arbres indiscrets
> Aux vitres penchaient leur feuillée
> Malinement, tout près, tout près.

The two editions of the *Parnasse contemporain*

had by then reached Charleville, and Rimbaud conceived therefrom a fierce and militant contempt for all contemporary writers, with the exception of Verlaine, whose poems struck him as having some faint breath, at least, of the wind of freedom. The moment he heard of the raising of the siege of Paris, Rimbaud, having pawned his watch, left a second time for the capital, and went straight to the studio of André Ghil, whose drawings he had seen in the illustrated papers. Ghil, who was absent at the moment, returned to find a fierce and arrogant peasant stretched on his sofa. He gave the boy ten francs and told him to go back to his mother. For eight days Rimbaud wandered about the streets of Paris, shelterless and feeding only on the garbage in the dustbins. Finally he could bear it no longer and started to walk back to Charleville, passing himself off as a franc-tireur in hiding, and obtaining thereby a little food from the farms on his way. When tramping one night through the forest of Villers-Cotterets, he was nearly discovered by some Bavarian Uhlans, and only escaped by flinging himself into a ditch, while the troop clattered by above him singing under the stars. Echoes of these wanderings along the high roads of France linger in his earliest poems :

> Je m'en allais, les poings dans mes poches crevées ;
> Mon paletot aussi devenait idéal ;
> J'allais sous le ciel, Muse, et j'étais ton féal.
> Oh là là, que d'amours splendides j'ai rêvées !

It was not long, however, before the bitter acid of

his temperament ate deeply into his poetical style: he became tortuous, obscure, brutal: he stamped exultingly upon the beauties and decencies of every-day convention: there was only one ideal—force and independence: the rest was literature. Take, for instance, "Mes Petites Amoureuses," written when he was still sixteen:

Un hydrolat lacrymal lave
 Les cieux vert-choux,
Sous l'arbre tendronnier qui bave
 Vos caoutchoucs.

Blancs de lunes particulières
 Aux pialats ronds,
Entrechoquez vos genouillères,
 Mes laiderons! . . .

O mes petites amoureuses,
 Que je vous hais!
Plaquez de fouffes douloureuses
 Vos tétons laids!

Piétinez mes vieilles terrines
 De sentiment;
Hop donc, soyez-moi ballerines
 Pour un moment!

2

In May 1871 Rimbaud, for the fourth time in six months, left his home and walked to Paris, where he flung himself into the Communist cause and fought as a soldier of the proletariat. At the entry of the Versaillais he managed to escape,

and in June he again returned to Charleville. From here he sent some of his verses to Verlaine, who at once hailed him as a genius and invited him to come at once to Paris. "You may be sure," he wrote, "that we shall make you welcome. Come at once."

It was thus in October 1871, when the relations of the Verlaine ménage were already strained to breaking-point, that this truculent prodigy appeared sulkily in the doorway of the rue Nicolet. Even Verlaine was somewhat disconcerted by his appearance: this large, red-fisted boy, with the filthy hair that hung down lank between his shoulders, the snub nose, and damp fleshy mouth, the insulting manners, the enormous appetite, was a little difficult to fit into a small Paris flat;—a flat, moreover, in which Verlaine himself was but a guest, and one welcomed only because inevitable. Fortunately M. Mauté was absent. Madame Mauté, that charitable being, and Mathilde could be trusted to do what they were asked. Verlaine had explained that the boy was a genius; what matter if he did eat gluttonously and with a sound of gulp and gasp, if he spoke and behaved like a peasant, and if he insisted after luncheon on sleeping in the courtyard? Madame Mauté and Mathilde agreed that he was obviously a genius, and they even brought themselves to the task of rendering Rimbaud, at least externally, a cleaner and less obnoxious visitor. Rimbaud has celebrated their attentions in a poem, char-

acteristic at once of his skill and of his vicious cynicism :

LES CHERCHEUSES DE POUX

Quand le front de l'enfant plein de rouges tourmentes,
Implore l'essaim blanc des rêves indistincts,
Il vient près de son lit deux grandes sœurs charmantes
Avec de frêles doigts aux ongles argentins.

Elles assoient l'enfant auprès d'une croisée
Grande ouverte où l'air bleu baigne un fouillis de fleurs.
Et, dans ses lourds cheveux où tombe la rosée,
Promènent leurs doigts fins, terribles et charmeurs.

Il écoute chanter leurs haleines craintives
Qui fleurent de longs miels végétaux et rosés
Et qu'interrompt parfois un sifflement, salives
Reprises sur la lèvre ou désirs de baisers.

Il intend leurs cils noirs battant sous les silences
Parfumés ; et leurs doigts électriques et doux
Font crépiter parmi ses grises indolences
Sous leurs ongles royaux la mort des petits poux.

Rimbaud had brought with him the manuscript of the *Bateau ivre*, and its perusal awoke in Verlaine such a flame of admiration as in this world of competition talent has but seldom consented to render to genius. With all his faults, Verlaine had no spark of jealousy or personal ambition, and he flung himself with real generosity into the task of securing for Rimbaud the recognition he deserved.

The *Bateau ivre* is indeed an astounding production. That it should be the work of a boy of sixteen is wellnigh incredible. In the glare of

its inspiration the glib architecture of the Parnassiens, the cadences of Verlaine's own poetry, assume but a paltry complexion. No wonder that the generation of to-day looks for stimulus to Rimbaud rather than to Verlaine or even Mallarmé —to Rimbaud who at nineteen was for ever to fling literature behind him. The *Bateau ivre* must be read as a whole: its value resides in its cumulative effect: it can only lose by partial quotation. It is in essence a hymn to force, a panegyric of independence. It is a picture of character triumphing over convention and the acquired moralities of human civilisation; it is a wild and bitter vision of superhuman existencies:

"Et j'ai vu quelquefois ce que l'homme a cru voir."

3

The Parnassiens were from the first disinclined to accept Rimbaud at the estimate which Verlaine had placed upon him. The *Bateau ivre* appeared to them to be a truculent and sensational poem, entirely devoid of that scholarly impassivity which was their ideal. The versification of Rimbaud's poems, his syntax and his vocabulary filled them with dismay: the scarlet patches, which mottled his inspirations, irritated their complacency. Even his since famous sonnet on the colours of the different vowels (A, black; E, white; I, red; U, green; O, blue) struck them, as indeed it

is, as being immensely ridiculous. Rimbaud's personality was, moreover, extremely distasteful even to the least exacting among Verlaine's intimates. The genial and forgiving Lepelletier sums him up as "an insufferable hooligan": for the others he quickly became anathema. Verlaine, persisted, however, in imposing his friend upon literary Paris. M. Mauté returned from the provinces and for a day or two Rimbaud was boarded out with Théodore de Banville. Verlaine, foreseeing that this sojourn was not likely to be more than temporary, found him a room in the rue Campagne Première, near the Observatoire, and forced his friends to subscribe to a fund which was to give Rimbaud three francs a day as pocket money. This meagre pittance he eked out by selling key rings on the boulevards, and a large proportion of his earnings was inevitably spent on drinking — generally at the Café Cluny in Verlaine's company. The indefatigable Verlaine dragged Rimbaud round Paris to see the literary celebrities, and they penetrated even into the august presence of Victor Hugo, who, with his unfailing enthusiasm, hailed Rimbaud as the "Child Shakespeare."

As has already been indicated, however, Rimbaud was anything but a success in Paris. Verlaine appears, indeed, to have been blind to the intense dislike engendered by his protégé. He allowed himself to be painted by Fantin Latour sitting next to Rimbaud in the famous picture "Coin de

Table," which was exhibited in the Salon of 1872, and which, after a period of private ownership at Manchester, has recently been given a place of honour in the Louvre. Verlaine went further. The young Parnassiens had formed a dining club called "Les Vilains Bonhommes," which used to meet weekly above a wine-shop at the corner of the rue Bonaparte and the place Saint Sulpice. Verlaine insisted upon taking Rimbaud to these gatherings, and the tension created by this tactless procedure culminated in a scene which went far to estrange Verlaine from his more reputable contemporaries. One evening when Jean Aicard was reciting a recently composed poem, Rimbaud, to show his contempt for the modern movement, continued to talk throughout the recitation. He was told to keep quiet; he was told that if he did not stop at once he would have his ears pulled. He thereupon seized Verlaine's sword-stick and rushed at his chief interlocutor, who was slightly wounded in the hand. From that day Rimbaud was excluded from the club, and Verlaine, taking this exclusion as a personal insult, also ceased to put in an appearance.

Rimbaud, whose contempt for his fellow human beings had not been decreased by his stay in Paris, now returned to Charleville. At the back of his mind was always the project of making his fortune in some distant country and returning rich and powerful to Europe to receive the adulation of those by whom he was now despised. Ernest

Delahaye contends also that representations were made to Rimbaud as to the harm he was doing Verlaine by remaining in his company, and that Rimbaud, with his contemptuous laugh, decided to wash his hands of the whole paltry business. Verlaine continued, however, to correspond with his dangerous young friend, and the nature of this correspondence is still a mystery. The fact remains, however, that in July 1872 Rimbaud suddenly joined Verlaine in Paris, and that the two went off together on what, for Verlaine at least, was to be an escapade of complete disaster.

4

Both Verlaine and Rimbaud subsequently wrote commentaries on this surprising elopement. Verlaine, writing many years after their final separation, and at a moment when he had received a false report of Rimbaud's death, looked back upon the year they had spent together in a mood of forgiveness—one might almost say of regret. The poem, which appears in *Parallèlement*, under the title "Laeti et Errabundi," deserves to be quoted at some length :

Les courses furent intrépides
(Comme aujourd'hui le repos pèse !)
Par les steamers et les rapides.
(Que me veut cet at home obèse ?)

Nous allions—vous en souvient-il,
Voyageur où ça disparu ?—

Filant légers dans l'air subtil,
Deux spectres joyeux, on eût cru !

.

Entre autres blâmables excès,
Je crois que nous bûmes de tout,
Depuis les plus grands vins français
Jusqu'à ce faro, jusqu'au stout.

.

Des paysages, des cités
Posaient pour nos yeux jamais las ;
Nos belles curiosités
Eussent mangé tous les atlas.

Fleuves et monts, bronzes et marbres,
Les couchants d'or, l'aube magique,
L'Angleterre, mère des arbres,
Fille des beffrois, la Belgique.

.

Le roman de vivre à deux hommes
Mieux que non pas d'époux modèles,
Chacun au tas versant des sommes
De sentiments forts et fidèles.

.

La misère aussi faisait rage
Par des fois dans le phalanstère :
On ripostait par le courage,
La joie et les pommes de terre.

.

Nous avions laissé sans émoi
Tous impédiments dans Paris,
Lui quelques sots bernés, et moi
Certaine princesse Souris,
Une sotte qui tourna pire. . . .

.

Ah ! quel cœur faible que mon cœur !
Mais mieux vaut souffrir que mourir,
Et surtout mourir de langueur.

On vous dit mort, vous. Que le diable
Emporte avec qui la colporte
La nouvelle irrémédiable
Qui vient ainsi battre ma porte !

Je n'y veux rien croire. Mort, vous,
Toi, dieu parmi les demi-dieux ?
Ceux qui le disent sont des fous !
Mort, mon grand péché radieux ? . . .

So much for Verlaine's jaunty version of the story: that of Rimbaud is completely different. On returning to Charleville in July 1873, after the final scene at Brussels, at a time, that is, when Verlaine was still in prison, Rimbaud set himself to write a work of scorching egoism which he entitled *A Season in Hell*. The book really represents the final defiance flung by Rimbaud at literature before abandoning it for ever. It is at the same time an attempted justification of his own atrocious personality. He tells how he has taught himself to loathe all beauty, and all morals; to love all hatred and all misery. How he had surrendered in a weak moment to the "hallucination of words"; how he came to "annotate the inexpressible"; and how all this must now be thrown aside. In its place must arise a new life of violence and of action. "I shall return," he writes, "with limbs of iron and with eyes of anger: by my face they shall know that I am of the strong: I shall have gold: I shall be indolent and brutal." In all this the history of his connexion with Verlaine is inserted as a mere incident, and is treated with an obscure and ghastly

cynicism. In the character of "la vierge folle" Verlaine is made to whine out his own confession while Rimbaud, in the character of "l'époux infernal," listens to it in satanic silence.

"Listen," he says, "to the confession of my companion in Hell," and then in a sobbing monotone the "vierge folle" is forced to utter her humiliating plaint:

Je suis esclave de l'Époux infernal, celui qui a perdu les vierges folles. . . . Je suis veuve. . . . J'étais veuve . . . mais oui, j'ai été bien sérieuse jadis, et je ne suis pas née pour devenir squelette ! . . . Lui était presque un enfant. . . . Ses délicatesses mystérieuses m'avaient séduite. J'ai oublié tout mon devoir humain pour le suivre. Quelle vie ! La vraie vie est absente. Nous ne sommes pas au monde. Je vais où il va, il le faut. Et souvent il s'emporte contre moi, *moi, la pauvre âme.* Le Démon !—C'est un démon, vous savez, *ce n'est pas un homme.* . . . Je l'écoute faisant de l'infamie une gloire, de la cruauté un charme. . . . Il avait la pitié d'une mère méchante pour les petits enfants. . . . A côté de son cher corps endormi . . . que d'heures des nuits j'ai veillé, cherchant pourquoi il voulait tant s'évader de la réalité. Je reconnaissais,—sans craindre pour lui,—qu'il pouvait être un sérieux danger dans la société. Il a peut-être des secrets pour *changer la vie* ? . . . Hélas ! je dépendais bien de lui. Mais que voulait-il avec mon existence terne et lâche ? . . . J'avais de plus en plus faim de sa bonté. . . . Par instants, j'oublie la pitié où je suis tombée : lui me rendra forte, nous voyagerons, nous chasserons dans les déserts, nous dormirons sur les pavés des villes inconnues, sans soins, sans peines. Ou je me réveillerai et les lois et les mœurs auront changé,—grâce à son pouvoir magique. . . . Il m'attaque, il passe des heures à me faire honte de tout ce

qui m'a pu toucher au monde, et s'indigne si je pleure. . . . Hélas ! il y avait des jours où tous les hommes agissant lui paraissaient les jouets de délires grotesques ; il riait affreusement, longtemps. Puis, il reprenait ses manières de jeune mère, de sœur aimée. S'il était moins sauvage, nous serions sauvés ! Mais sa douceur aussi est mortelle. Je lui suis soumise. Ah ! je suis folle ! . . .

Drôle de ménage !

5

In all literature it would be difficult to find a more cruel or a more revelatory piece of writing. The whole of Verlaine's character is there. His impulsiveness, his weakness and his dependence. How skilfully Rimbaud ridiculed Verlaine's hesitation to abandon his home and family ! What dazzling prospects of travel and adventure he held out to him ! What sojourns under alien stars and in the exotic indolence of southern climates ! They would be free ; they would be immaterial : they would be alone together in some far and irresponsible island ! What was civilised domesticity but a peculiarly squalid form of suicide ? What was human duty but a facet of the bauble of convention ? These things were well enough for " the others "—for the prudent, the docile and the old. But for youth and genius ? Youth must respond to its privileges ; it must be winged and relentless ; it must escape.

So much for the imaginative effect on Verlaine's temperament. But that timid casuistry which he

called his reason also persuaded him that escape was after all a very possible solution. His life was becoming extremely complicated at the rue Nicolet: he liked scenes in principle, but their constant repetition was apt to weary; the deepening contrast between what he had dreamed of and what he had realised was more than irksome; it was humiliating; it was grotesque. It would be an effort to resume marital relations; it would be an effort to re-establish himself with his friends; escape would at least be easy. It would at least be definite. One would avoid explanations; one would avoid arguments; and then one would get away to London, and oh! the brilliance, the unanswerable poignancy of the letters which could then be composed! As for the future, something would turn up: things always settled themselves in the end if one only gave them time. And then Mathilde? Ah yes, there was Mathilde. But she didn't really love him. She would get over it; she would come back to him afterwards; she would be happier alone with her parents. When all was over he would return in an orgy of self-humiliation; he would kneel at her feet and she would forgive him even as a mother forgives her child.

And then after all, why on earth shouldn't he go to London with a friend if he wished to?

The die was cast, and all his after life Verlaine was to regret it.

6

The adventure which was to end in tragedy opened in farce. The two friends took the night train for Arras, where they arrived so early that all but the station buffet was closed to them. In the exhilaration of their freedom they behaved like schoolboys. Leaning over the bar they talked in loud whispers together of some imaginary murder they had committed; of how to dispose of the corpse; of what to do with the booty. As was intended, this conversation electrified the few travellers who at that early hour were sipping their coffee at the station. In particular, one gentleman, at whom Rimbaud had pointed with silent laughter, felt it his duty as a citizen to warn the police. They were arrested and conducted to the Mairie, where they were obliged to undergo the magistrate's examination. Rimbaud, who was the first to be examined, created some effect by skilfully feigning tears. Verlaine, when his turn came, found the magistrate in a mood of forgiveness bordering on apology. The occasion was too good to be missed. Verlaine launched out into a diatribe against an administration which exposed its peaceful citizens to such high-handed treatment: he would return to Paris; he would see his friend M. Victor Hugo; he would use his great influence with the Press of Paris to expose the scandalous abuses to which the provincial

satraps of the Republic were addicted; nay, more, as a native of Metz he would exercise his right of option—he would choose to become a German rather than to remain French under such a corrupt and autocratic system; and Paris, nay, the whole world, should learn the reason why. The magistrate was not impressed by this outburst of eloquence: he was annoyed. In a few curt words he ordered the strange pair to be conducted to the station, and placed under escort in the next train for Paris. On arrival at the Gare du Nord the two at once changed into another train which was to carry them direct to the Belgian frontier.

7

During that July and August they wandered as happy vagabonds throughout the towns and villages of Belgium. Gay and irresponsible, they reeled through Charleroi and Walcourt, through Malines and through Brussels.

> Gares prochaines,
> Gais chemins grands . . .
> Quelles aubaines,
> Bons juifs errants!

They visited churches and circuses. They visited museums and village fairs:

> Tournez, tournez, bons chevaux de bois,
> Tournez cent tours, tournez mille tours,

Tournez souvent et tournez toujours,
Tournez, tournez au son des hautbois . . .

Tournez, tournez ! Le ciel en velours
D'astres en or se vêt lentement.
Voici partir l'amante et l'amant.
Tournez au son joyeux des tambours.

The irresponsible gaiety which lives in the Belgian poems of the *Romances sans paroles* was not of long duration. Already the seed of regret was flowering for Verlaine into the sad thistles of remorse. At first it is merely a note of sadness amid the carnival of their enjoyment:

Il pleure dans mon cœur
Comme il pleut sur la ville.
Quelle est cette langueur
Qui pénètre mon cœur ?

O bruit doux de la pluie
Par terre et sur les toits !
Pour un cœur qui s'ennuie,
O le chant de la pluie !

Il pleure sans raison
Dans ce cœur qui s'écœure.
Quoi ! nulle trahison ?
Ce deuil est sans raison.

C'est bien la pire peine
De ne savoir pourquoi,
Sans amour et sans haine,
Mon cœur a tant de peine !

He finds it less easy to forget Mathilde than it was to desert her: the sound of some familiar mutual tune caught as he passes by brings a sudden stab of remembrance; the picture of her in her

light summer dress comes back to him with disturbing frequency: and Rimbaud, wonderful as he is, has his moments of violence, he plays their joint game of truancy with too morose a maturity.

Il faut, voyez-vous, nous pardonner les choses.
De cette façon nous serons bien heureuses,
Et si notre vie a des instants moroses,
Du moins nous serons, n'est-ce pas ? deux pleureuses. . . .

Soyons deux enfants, soyons deux jeunes filles
Éprises de rien et de tout étonnées,
Qui s'en vont pâlir sous les chastes charmilles
Sans même savoir qu'elles sont pardonnées.

In September they crossed to London, and in his uneasy heart Verlaine carried with him the leaden sense of what he had so whimsically sacrificed. How shadowy indeed is the line which divides an adventure from an ordeal, an escape from exile! Verlaine began to be frightened. Supposing that what he had done were irremediable? Supposing that he could never return to the calm of matrimony? Supposing, more immediate terror, that Rimbaud were suddenly to leave him? Then indeed he would be a frail vessel driven rudderless before the storm.

O triste, triste était mon âme
A cause, à cause d'une femme.

Je ne me suis pas consolé
Bien que mon cœur s'en soit allé.

Bien que mon cœur, bien que mon âme
Eussent fui loin de cette femme.

Je ne me suis pas consolé,
Bien que mon cœur s'en soit allé.

Et mon cœur, mon cœur trop sensible
Dit à mon âme : Est-il possible,

Est-il possible, — le fut-il, —
Ce fier exil, ce triste exil ?

To make matters worse, Verlaine learnt, shortly after his arrival in London, that his wife had instituted proceedings for a legal separation. He wrote letter after letter to Lepelletier, in which he gave vent to the most extravagant threats and proposals. He would come over and make a scene. He would come over and assault his wife's lawyers. Rimbaud and he would come over together and submit themselves to an examination. Meanwhile Lepelletier must send over his books, his pictures and his son! And through all this hysterical correspondence runs a little thread of anxiety as to what people are saying in Paris. What do his friends think? Has any one dared to breathe a word of scandal? If so, they will have to answer for it. Meanwhile Lepelletier must deny everything, he must be combative and contradictory. Or perhaps, after all, it would be better to leave things alone. What does Lepelletier think? "If there is a scandal," Verlaine writes, "you must deny everything," and then pitiably he concludes, "unless you think it better to keep silent."

Verlaine and Rimbaud had by then settled into rooms at No. 34 Howland Street. Rimbaud with

his customary energy set about learning English, and endeavoured to obtain through the merchants in the City some appointment in the East. He cut his hair, if not short, at least within reasonable limits, and he bought a top hat. Verlaine in a more desultory fashion also began to learn English, and through it all they were both busy writing: Rimbaud those beautiful, but quite incomprehensible, poems in prose which, after his death, were published under the title of *Les Illuminations*, and Verlaine the occasional pieces collected in his volume *Romances sans paroles*. As time went on Verlaine began to reconcile himself to the prospect of a legal separation. With his curiously buoyant optimism he appears never to have realised that his departure under such peculiar circumstances would for ever render impossible a reconciliation with a person of Mathilde's limited intelligence. As we know, she was a "sotte qui tourna pire"; and poor thing, how could she, a child of but nineteen, forget the blows of a drunken husband or his desertion at the supreme moment of a young wife's experience? Verlaine appears quite sincerely to have ignored the gravity of his behaviour: again and again during the years which were to follow he endeavoured to induce Mathilde to come back to him, and her constant refusal always filled him anew with surprised and injured indignation. For the moment, however, he stilled his anxiety with the milk of human optimism. Verlaine liked London—the grim, gritty London of 1872. He liked

the docks, and the noise and the little boot-blacks outside Charing Cross. He liked the Thames, "that whirlwind of mud." He even liked the English. "Their absurdities," he wrote, "are not really objectionable." At first he did not like the public-houses: he found them uncomfortable, unwelcoming and rather furtive; he missed the frank and expansive gaiety of the Parisian café; he objected to the smell of stale beer, the comparative absence of seats, and the ground glass in the windows. But in the end he liked them also, and even too well; and, after all, in a world of gin and hurdy-gurdies, of flaring gas-jets, and flower girls dancing in Soho alleys, one could live, one could laugh, and above all one could forget:

DANSONS LA GIGUE!

J'aimais surtout ses jolis yeux,
Plus clairs que l'étoile des cieux,
J'aimais ses yeux malicieux.
Dansons la gigue!

Elle avait des façons vraiment
De désoler un pauvre amant,
Que c'en était vraiment charmant
Dansons la gigue!

Je me souviens, je me souviens
Des heures et des entretiens,
Et c'est le meilleur de mes biens.
Dansons la gigue!

Verlaine was able also to renew acquaintance with his old Communist friends, those of them who had escaped the 24th of May, and were now living

precariously in London. And then he was writing: "I have never," he says in a letter to Lepelletier, "written more than I am now doing." Of all this energy, little remains beyond the scattered verses of the *Romances sans paroles*, and some of the better pieces of *Jadis et naguère*.

8

In December of that year Rimbaud returned to Charleville, and Verlaine remained on in London. They had separated by mutual consent, and with a promise from Rimbaud that he would return shortly: his departure was nothing but a holiday; he was "going on leave." Verlaine, however, who could not be left alone for a minute, summoned his mother to London, and the poor, docile woman came immediately. With Rimbaud's departure and the arrival of his mother, Verlaine began to dream of constructing some new scheme of life for himself in England. He would give French lessons. He and his mother would take some cottage in the suburbs, where they would evolve a faint shadow of his abandoned domesticity. He writes to Lepelletier: "Je me referai une tranquillité—et qui sait?" In the first weeks of 1873 Madame Verlaine returned to Arras, where she was then established, leaving her son, apparently calm and contented, to make preparations for their future installation. Towards the end of February, however, he suddenly fell ill with what was probably

influenza. In a panic he telegraphed to his mother, to his wife and to Rimbaud, begging them all three to fly to his bedside to receive his dying benediction. His mother and Rimbaud arrived together to find him well on the road to convalescence. His wife, to Verlaine's pain and surprise, did not put in an appearance. It was decided that Paul should be taken home to recover. He refused to go to France, as he was still terrified of being denounced for participation in the Commune. Besides France would mean Paris, and Paris would entail the uncertainty, at street corners and on the café terraces, of whether he would, or would not, be cut by his acquaintances. Leconte de Lisle would certainly cut him; so might even Coppée, whose head had perhaps been turned by the continued success of *Le Passant*; and Catulle Mendès? and Anatole France? No, it would be better, as yet, not to endure such an ordeal. So Verlaine was taken to his father's home in the Ardennes, which, since 1815, had conveniently been enclosed within the Belgian frontier. He was to cross by Newhaven and Dieppe. But on embarking he was so terrified by the presence on board of two persons whom he took to be French secret police, that he scrambled back on to the quay at Newhaven, returned to London, and crossed next day direct to Antwerp. From there he proceeded to Jehonville, his father's village, not far from Sedan, and all too close—"nimium vicina!"—to Charleville, where Rimbaud was then living.

For the first few weeks of his stay at Jehonville Verlaine appears to have been fired by definite hopes of a reconciliation with his wife. It is not clear whether there was any ground for this optimism. It is possible that his mother and Madame Mauté had been in correspondence, and that the former, increasingly anxious at the constant visits of Rimbaud to Jehonville, had painted a glowing picture of the probable success of her intrigue. It is possible also that Verlaine expected great things from the intervention of Victor Hugo, who had promised to go and see Mathilde. These hopes were in any case not to be realised. In the early weeks of May, Verlaine and Rimbaud joined each other at Bouillon, and left at once for Antwerp and London.

9

During this, the second period of their stay in London, the two poets lived at 8 Great College Street, Camden Town. Their relations seem from the outset to have been embittered by the lack of money. On the occasion of their original escape from Paris, Verlaine had managed to extract from his mother a very large portion of the poor woman's shrinking fortune. We know that between 1871 and 1873 Verlaine and Rimbaud accounted for some £600 of Madame Verlaine's capital. On the second occasion he appears to have had more difficulty in loosening his mother's purse-strings.

Although he had no taste for luxury, Verlaine was always vague and volatile about money. Rimbaud, on the other hand, had a very robust sense of its importance: he was quite prepared to live with Verlaine so long as the latter paid for everything; but the moment that a touch of penury came upon the household, it was time that Rimbaud went elsewhere to make his fortune. So what with one thing and another those spring days in Camden Town were not without their thunderstorms. The atmosphere became daily, almost hourly, more hectic. The continuous drinking of strong spirits had reduced Verlaine's nerves to a most sensitive condition; Rimbaud, for his part, was already dreaming of new combinations and exotic climates. The *saison en enfer* was drawing to a close: it was to end in the squalor of a vulgar wrangle. One hot evening at the end of June, Verlaine had been out marketing for their joint supper. He appears to have marketed badly: the fish that he had purchased was high; it was so high that even the street urchins in Camden Town shouted remarks upon its passage. This annoyed Verlaine: although he could bow before abuse, and smile at criticism, he loathed comment. In a state of seething irritation he reached the threshold of their joint living-room; Rimbaud was sitting there toying with the intricacies of *Les Illuminations*. Unfortunately he, in his turn, commented upon the defects of Paul's purchase. This was too much for Verlaine. In an access of fury he flung the

parcel at Rimbaud, dashed out of the house, and left that evening for Antwerp. Rimbaud was abandoned in London without a penny in his pocket. From Antwerp Verlaine telegraphed to his mother and to his wife, telling them that he had left Rimbaud, and would they please both come to Brussels at once. He would meet them there at the Hôtel Liégeois, rue Pachéco. If his wife refused to come he would commit suicide. He spent the interval in purchasing a revolver with which to carry out his menace. He contemplated "je ne sais quelle mort légère et délicate." The next day he went on to Brussels: his mother was there, but of his wife there was not a word. In a passion of disappointment he passed the night in an orgy of drinking. With the dawn came black reaction and in its wake the thought of Rimbaud. Of his two anchors—his two "loves, of hope and of despair"—one had now quite definitely failed him. He turned to the other, the evil genius whom he had so impulsively abandoned. He telegraphed imploringly to Rimbaud to come and join him and his mother in Brussels. He telegraphed him money for his ticket. On the 10th of July Rimbaud arrived. He stood in the doorway of the hotel bedroom, morose and obstinate. He had come at Verlaine's bidding, but he had only come to say good-bye: to say good-bye and to obtain money. It was all over between them. Let them give him the money and allow him to go. In blank despair Verlaine sat upon the bed, looking across at the

boy who had brought him to so great a misery. Instinctively he began to temporise: of course Rimbaud should have the money; of course he should go if he wished it; but at least let them part as friends; let them go out together into the streets of Brussels where, but a year ago, they had been so happy. They could discuss the whole thing better in the open air; they could sit together in a café; they could drink.

An hour later they returned to the hotel, and the scene in the bedroom, with Verlaine's mother flitting nervously between them, was repeated. Again Verlaine sat there sobbing out every plea which his disordered brain could muster. Again Rimbaud stood in the doorway, holding out his red fist for the money, pale, fierce and obdurate. Verlaine's whole world crashed scarlet before him: drawing his revolver from his pocket he fired two shots in Rimbaud's direction. The first bullet lodged in Rimbaud's left wrist; the second buried itself in the floor. In a paroxysm of remorse, Verlaine flung himself at the feet of his victim; his terrified mother tried to bind up the bleeding wrist, and pressing money into Rimbaud's other hand begged him to go, to go, to leave them. Rimbaud remained unperturbed: with a shrug of the shoulders he allowed Verlaine to walk with him as far as the station. On their way there the discussion flamed up again. On reaching the place Rouppe, Verlaine ran a few paces in front, and turning round advanced upon Rimbaud with his

hand upon the revolver in his pocket. The latter, in his turn, fled in the direction of some gendarmes, followed closely by Verlaine screaming in his high falsetto and waving his revolver. They were at once arrested.

Such was the conclusion of the *saison en enfer*.

10

Rimbaud was taken to the Hospital St. Jean: his wounds were dressed: he was given anti-tetanus serum, and three days later the bullet was extracted. Verlaine was conducted to the police station behind the Hôtel de Ville, and then to the town gaol, which, as a relic of the Spanish occupation, was called by the cordial name of the "Amigo." The next day he was transferred to the Prison de Carmes. At first he was treated as a common felon, but an examination of his effects had disclosed a letter from Victor Hugo. The letter ran as follows:

> My poor Poet—I promise to go and see your charming wife, and I will intercede with her in your favour in the name of your dear little son. Be brave and return to the paths of truth.
>
> Victor Hugo.

The discovery of this letter impressed the magistrate, and at once assured Verlaine better treatment. He was given a cell to himself, and,

pending his trial, was permitted to order his meals in from outside. Every day he was for half an hour allowed to walk alone in the enclosed court below his window, and from there he could see the leaves of a poplar swaying in the evening sun, and hear the faint murmur of the life outside. It was thus at the Prison de Carmes, and while awaiting his trial, that Verlaine wrote what is perhaps the best-known of all his poems :

Le ciel est, par-dessus le toit,
Si bleu, si calme !
Un arbre, par-dessus le toit,
Berce sa palme.

La cloche, dans le ciel qu'on voit,
Doucement tinte.
Un oiseau sur l'arbre qu'on voit
Chante sa plainte.

Mon Dieu, mon Dieu, la vie est là,
Simple et tranquille,
Cette paisible rumeur-là
Vient de la ville !

— Qu'as-tu fait, ô toi que voilà
Pleurant sans cesse,
Dis, qu'as-tu fait, toi que voilà,
De ta jeunesse ?

The trial took place in August. (The dossier thereof is No. 148 of 1873.) From the first it went against Verlaine. Rimbaud, it is true, behaved well, and in the deposition that had been wrung out of him in hospital, he had tried to reduce the affair to the dimensions of a foolish quarrel. But the Brussels police had made inquiries in

Paris. They had learnt that Verlaine had been connected with the Commune: they had taken the vindictive evidence of Monsieur Mauté. The Court at Brussels was most unfavourably impressed. Verlaine at first rather enjoyed his trial: it was sensational and dramatic. The charge against him was "assault leading to temporary incapacity of the victim." It did not seem very serious; a mere case of felony. The penalty would be light. But the Belgian judges thought differently, and when on August 8 they passed the maximum sentence of two years' solitary confinement and a 200-francs fine, Verlaine broke down in terrified astonishment. An appeal was lodged to the High Court of Brabant. On August 27, however, the High Court rejected the appeal and confirmed the original sentence.

Verlaine was taken back to the Prison de Carmes to be transferred a month later to the gaol at Mons.

11

From the hour of that strange and flurried scene in the sunlight of the place Rouppe, Rimbaud was, except for one significant meeting two years later, to pass for ever out of the life of Paul Verlaine. Thus in a monograph on the latter, Rimbaud should, by all tradition, be at this stage dismissed with a few valedictory phrases. I do not feel, however, that this is possible. The

tragedy of Verlaine's life centred and culminated in his connexion with Rimbaud, in the satanic attraction which that relentless character exercised upon his weak but not unamiable nature. And the full force of Rimbaud's character can only be comprehended if his life is taken as a whole. I propose, therefore, in this chapter, and while the course of Verlaine's own biography is suspended by his sojourn in the rose-red gaol of Mons, to tell the story of the life and death of Arthur Rimbaud.

So soon as the bullet had been extracted and his evidence taken, Rimbaud had been escorted to the French frontier, from where he found his way back on foot to Charleville. He at once set himself to write the *Saison en enfer* and to arrange for its publication in Brussels. Hardly, however, had the book been issued than he recalled it. All but a few isolated copies were supposed to have been destroyed, and it was from one of these survivals that the work was re-edited by his brother-in-law after his death. A further set of the original edition which had escaped destruction was, however, discovered quite recently in a cellar at Mons. The *Saison en enfer* was thus the only book that Rimbaud himself allowed to be published, and even that he caused to be destroyed so soon as it was issued. To his earlier poems reference has already been made in a previous chapter; enough has been said of the *Saison en enfer* to give some impression of that acid human document. There remain the *Illuminations*—the work which, after the *Saison en*

enfer, is most typical of Rimbaud's unpleasing genius.

The *Illuminations*, which were discovered in manuscript by Charles de Sivry and published in 1886, consist of a series of prose poems intersected by occasional pieces in verse. They are obscure, violent, tortured and in places terrible; but they possess at least a glow of genius and are heightened by touches of lurid beauty. The piece entitled "Aube" is as fine a prose poem as exists in any language, while as regards the verses, the following two stanzas from "Éternité" may be taken as characteristic:

De votre ardeur seule,
Braises de satin,
Le devoir s'exhale
Sans qu'on dise: enfin.

Elle est retrouvée.
Quoi? L'éternité,
C'est la mer allée
Avec le soleil.

The book contains other pieces of real interest: there is the subtle paganism of "Antique":

Gracieux fils de Pan! Autour de ton front couronné de fleurettes et de baies, tes yeux, des boules précieuses, remuent. Tachées de lies brunes, tes joues se creusent. Tes crocs luisent. Ta poitrine ressemble à une cithare, des tintements circulent dans tes bras blonds. Ton cœur bat dans ce ventre où dort le double sexe. Promène-toi, la nuit, en mouvant doucement cette cuisse, cette seconde cuisse, et cette jambe de gauche.

Or again the following from " Enfance ":

Au bois il y a un oiseau, son chant vous arrête et vous fait rougir.
Il y a une horloge qui ne sonne pas.
Il y a une fondrière avec un nid de bêtes blanches.
Il y a une cathédrale qui descend et un lac qui monte.

The subtle and deliberate suggestions of Rimbaud's style are not only interesting in themselves, but are of great importance in their effect upon much of the French writing of to-day. Consider, for instance, the influence which the oblique handling of such sentences as the following has exercised upon later French literature:

. . . princesses de démarche et de costume tyranniques, petites étrangères et personnes doucement malheureuses.
Tout se fit ombre et aquarium ardent. Au matin,—aube de juin batailleuse,—je courus aux champs, âne, claironnant et brandissant mon grief, jusqu'à ce que les Sabines de la banlieue vinrent se jeter à mon poitrail.

From this springs much of what was later to blossom into the elusive attraction of Jules Laforgue: to this the present planets of the younger generation, and Jean Cocteau in particular, render a generous tribute of indebtedness.

Apart, however, from their literary interest, the *Illuminations* throw a harsh but vivid light upon Rimbaud's own life and character. Written in London during the year he was with Verlaine, there is much in them that explains the final rupture.

"Je suis," he writes, "un inventeur bien autrement méritant que tous ceux qui m'ont précédé; un musicien même, qui ai trouvé quelque chose comme la clef de l'amour. A présent, gentilhomme d'une campagne maigre au ciel sobre, j'essaie de m'émouvoir au souvenir de l'enfance mendiante, de l'apprentissage ou de l'arrivée en sabots, des polémiques, des cinq ou six veuvages, et quelques noces où ma forte tête m'empêcha de monter au diapason des camarades. Je ne regrette pas ma vieille part de gaîté divine: l'air sobre de cette aigre campagne alimente fort activement mon atroce scepticisme. Mais comme ce scepticisme ne peut désormais être mis en œuvre, et que, d'ailleurs, je suis dévoué à un trouble nouveau,—j'attends de devenir un très méchant fou."

There are references to his life with Verlaine which are even more definite. It must have been but a few weeks before the final rupture that he wrote the following:

Non! nous ne passerons pas l'été dans cet avare pays où nous ne serons jamais que des orphelins fiancés. Je veux que ce bras durci ne traîne plus une chère image.

Finally in the piece entitled "Vagabonds" there is a fierce little etching of his contempt for Verlaine—the "poor brother" who would on occasions drag him from his bed at night "en hurlant son songe de chagrin idiot."

12

Having destroyed the edition of the *Saison en enfer*, and having said farewell to the *Illuminations*

Rimbaud again started on his travels. In November he was in Paris; and the next month he left for London in the company of his friend Germain Nouveau, a visionary musician who was to end his days in a monastery. Early in 1874 he returned to Charleville, where on this occasion he remained for several months, reviewing his harried past, and making vast plans for a fierce and glorious future. His one aim in life was, and had always been, to achieve power. As a boy, encouraged by the plaudits of his friends and masters, he had dreamt of imposing himself by the force of literature. He would pull down the shrines and idols of the past, and on their wreckage he would rebuild an edifice of his own imagining. He would trample upon all beauty; upon all gentleness; upon all emotion; he would be obscene, immoral and relentless; he would create a literature of force. He knew now that he had failed in all this: he had been carried away by the alchemy of words; he had been led to the season in hell; he had been weakened.

Par Délicatesse
J'ai perdu ma vie.

So he would start afresh: it was unworthy to dream dreams; action alone was the gate to liberty, the road to power. His fatal fault had been to imagine that he could trample unscathed upon the conventions of Western civilisation. "Les marais occidentaux!" had sucked him

down. He would go to the East: to the fountain-head of eternal wisdom. He would return as an opulent but ungenerous dictator. They would regret that they had not realised him sufficiently and in time.

Rimbaud had been sixteen when he first met Verlaine: he was but eighteen at the time of the scene at Brussels: at nineteen he was to abandon literature for ever.

At the end of 1874 he proceeded to Germany, and obtained employment as a teacher in a school in Stuttgart, where he lived at Marienstrasse No. 2. Early in 1875 Verlaine was released from prison: Rimbaud's address was known only to Ernest Delahaye and through the latter Verlaine sent him letter after letter. He told him of his conversion to the Catholic faith: he described the paracletic potency of the Sacred Heart: he urged him by every argument in his power to take the same primrose path to sanity and calm. "Let us," he wrote to him, "love each other in Jesus." Rimbaud, on his side, was amused, and slightly irritated. Verlaine was pestering Delahaye to give him his friend's address: Rimbaud had no objection: after all what difference could it make? He wrote to Delahaye: "I don't care. If you like, yes! Give my address to Loyola." Verlaine left at once for Stuttgart. Poor Verlaine! He was at that date an uncouth but impatient object: his beard, which had been shaved in prison, was as yet anarchical: he arrived in so disreputable a

condition that Rimbaud became from the first indignant. Verlaine, fired by his new faith, was undeterred: he launched off at once into his task of conversion. The proselyte was taken from Bierhalle to Bierhalle, and then out into the country. The argument lasted all day, and achieved its climax at midnight on the banks of the Neckar. There was a limit to Rimbaud's patience. He turned upon Verlaine and struck him again and again till he lay bleeding on the river-bank. He then left him, and walked back alone to Stuttgart. The next morning Verlaine was discovered by some peasants and taken by them to their cottage, where he remained until he was well enough to return to France. Such was the last meeting between Verlaine and Rimbaud.

13

By the spring of 1875 Rimbaud had mastered the German language. It was time to endure other adventures. It was time to seek the Orient. He left on foot, and on foot he crossed the St. Gotthard and dropped into Italy. He arrived hungry, weather-beaten and exhausted. At Milan his blue eyes attracted the pity and attention of a fortuitous female acquaintance. For a month he lived with her, eating her food and as voraciously acquiring her Italian. From there he set off, again

on foot, for Brindisi and the East, but on the road between Leghorn and Siena he had a sunstroke and was taken to the Leghorn Hospital. On recovery he was repatriated by the French Consul to Marseilles. And there at the gateway to the Orient he lingered, unwilling to return homewards. But it was not easy to live on nothing: it was not easy to secure employment. All that summer he laboured as a porter in the docks, freighting the great steamers which swung out so easily and so often for the distant horizons of his desire. With the winter came the thought of home. A chance meeting with a Carlist recruiting agent offered an opportunity which could not be missed. He enlisted in the Carlist forces, and having obtained an advance of pay, he at once deserted and bought a ticket for Paris. By the winter of 1875 he was again at Charleville. He had shaved his head: he was learning the piano: he was waiting for the spring.

Early in 1876 he again set out for the Orient. He told his mother that he had obtained employment at Vienna, and thereby induced her to give him some money. On arrival in Vienna, however, he was robbed of all this money by a cabman, and saw himself obliged to beg a living in the streets. The Austrian police thereupon arrested him as a mendicant, and he was conducted to the German frontier. The German police in their turn expelled him into France, and from the frontier he walked back to Charleville. From

there he wrote to a missionary society asking to be sent to the East to preach the gospel. His references appear, however, to have given the Society some doubts as to the depth of his vocation, since in a few weeks we find him again a pagan upon the road. On this occasion he tramped through Belgium and on into Holland, where at last his dreams were to be realised. He fell in with a Dutch recruiting sergeant and at once enlisted for service in the East Indies. The Dutch Government were to give him 1200 francs as an advance of pay and a free passage to Java. At last the wheel of fortune was turning in his favour. On arrival in Java he at once deserted and took to the jungle, where he subsisted for weeks on fruit and tree-roots, hiding in order to escape being shot as a deserter. Eventually he succeeded, hungry but immune, in reaching Batavia, and there, to complete the undiluted Conrad of the whole episode, was a British ship in immediate need of an interpreter. He had always possessed a rare and penetrating gift for languages. In a few hours he was free of Java and steaming via the Cape for Liverpool and safety. On leaving the Cape the ship passed close to St. Helena, so close that Rimbaud conceived a desire to visit, and at once, the scene of Napoleon's internment. He insisted that the ship should be stopped immediately. The captain refused, and Rimbaud thereupon jumped into the sea. A boat was lowered and he was pulled on board again

and kept under observation until he reached Liverpool and eventually Dieppe. From there he arrived home in the autumn of 1877.

After a few months' rest he once more set out upon his journeys. Although his desertion at Java had exposed him to just retribution on the part of the Dutch Government, he proceeded straight to Holland. He then found his way to the German frontier, where by glittering promises he induced a number of young Germans to enlist in the Dutch Colonial forces. Returning with this booty to Holland, he handed them over to the Dutch Recruiting Office. With the commission he obtained for this service Rimbaud left for Hamburg, hoping at that port again to obtain a passage to Eastern waters. The drinking dens of Hamburg were, however, too much for him: his money had gone before he had obtained employment. For a time, therefore, he was forced to enter an itinerant circus, and with this he travelled through Denmark and Sweden, his now haggard face and scanty beard looming strangely from behind the *guichet* where he gave out the tickets. The occupation was uncongenial: unlike Verlaine, Rimbaud detested the placidity of Northern Europe: it was obnoxious to him to sit all day receiving the pennies of the docile Scandinavians. On reaching Stockholm, therefore, he went to the French Consul to whom he told some elaborate but convincing story of distress and indigence: his haggard appearance, his youth, and his obvious

culture gained him sympathy: the Consul agreed to repatriate him to France.

Rimbaud's return on this occasion appears to have been prompted solely by the desire to extort more money from his hard, but by no means indigent, mother. He told her that he had obtained a lucrative post with a firm in Hamburg, and she gave him enough money to proceed to that port. On arriving there he did actually succeed in getting employment which entailed his being sent to Alexandria. On reaching Egypt, however, he at once escaped to Cyprus, where he became a foreman in some sun-scarred quarries in a remote part of the island. While thus employed he was struck down by fever, and again returned to Charleville.

14

In the seven years which had passed since the scene at Brussels, Rimbaud had thus been in turn a schoolmaster, a dockyard hand, a Carlist deserter, a street beggar, a Dutch soldier, a ship's interpreter, a press-gang agent, an accountant in a travelling circus, and a quarryman. He had visited England, Germany, Italy, Austria, Holland, the East Indies, Scandinavia, Egypt and Cyprus. And each time he had returned home to Charleville, only to leave again with the coming of the spring.

The early days of March 1880 were, however,

to witness his final abandonment of what he has called the "ancient parapets of Europe." His family were not to see him again for fully eleven years, and were then to welcome only the shattered remnants of a broken man with the shadow of death already upon him. He was but twenty-five, therefore, when he left home for ever, walking as before over the St. Gotthard and thus to Egypt. We see him for a month or two again in Cyprus, employed this time as overseer during the construction of the summer villa then being built for the British High Commissioner on the summit of Mount Troodos. He appears later in the Red Sea: at Jeddah for a while, at Suakim, at Massowah, at Hodeidah, and finally settled in the Hôtel de l'Univers upon the bare and burning rock of Aden. Here he obtained work with the French firm of Mazeran, Viannay & Bardey, by whom he was eventually sent to the interior of Abyssinia.

From 1881 Rimbaud was established at Harrar, dealing in coffee, gums, incense, ostrich feathers and ivory: exploring a little: gun-running a little also: in touch with Menelik: in touch also with the French Geographical Society: disliked by the few Europeans with whom he came into contact: feared and respected by the natives. From time to time we find him back in Aden, at one moment living in complete domesticity with an Abyssinian woman—a nebulous figure, of whom we know only that she smoked cigarettes, dressed as a European and was very gentle. Already by 1884 he had

made money: his first savings he had sent home and his mother had foolishly invested these in land: his later savings he kept with him. We find him in 1887 in Cairo, resting after a disastrous expedition to Choa, with dysentery and 40,000 francs in his waist-belt. But it is Harrar always that remains his headquarters, that red-walled city among the South Abyssinian uplands, where he lived in a one-storied European house beside the mosque. He was not happy. He despised the Abyssinian human almost as much as he had despised the human of Western Europe. He read scientific text-books: he studied the native languages—Amharic, Galla, Somali, Arabic, and all the dialects. He had schemes for getting other and more lucrative employment. At one moment we find him planning to go ivory-hunting to the Lakes; at another he is thinking of South America, of Panama. But in spite of all this he will not return to Europe. He was afraid he would get into trouble for having avoided his military service. He could not face the cold: he could not grapple with any sedentary or subservient function. "The only thing for me," he writes, "and the most pressing, is to be independent, no matter how or where so long as I am independent": and again, "You must not expect that my temperament will ever become less vagrant."

Through all these years there is not a sign of interest, not even of curiosity, as regards his own past or his former intimates. For him literature

was dead for ever: and he was unwilling to plant flowers upon its grave. When in Cairo in 1887, he had written to the *Temps* asking to be sent as their correspondent with the Italian forces in Abyssinia. The editor of the *Temps* was not able to accept the offer, but in his reply he added a postscript informing Rimbaud that he had become a literary hero in Paris, that a new form of literature was being based upon his vowel sonnet. But Rimbaud remained unmoved. Even when the incompetence of his own family forced him to write to Ernest Delahaye for some scientific apparatus, he was careful to discourage any renewal of their former intimacy. He began his letter "Mon cher Delahaye," and he deliberately called him "Albert" instead of "Ernest" Delahaye upon the envelope. No insult was too petty for Rimbaud so long as it was of a nature to prove effective. Even his letters to his family are of the most frigid nature: the personal note is carefully excluded: they begin icily with "Mes chers amis," and they consist almost wholly of requests for text-books on metallurgy, hydraulics, mineralogy, artesian wells, topography ("not *photography*," he says despairingly in one letter), or of instructions as to how his savings are to be invested. As regards his own life, he gives them little beyond a thin stream of casual discontent. It is perhaps unfair to judge a man by his letters to his family, but Rimbaud's published correspondence is amazingly anodyne. Even his first arrival at the pink city of Harrar is

chronicled but as follows : " The country is situated at a high altitude, but is not infertile. The climate is cool and not unhealthy. European goods reach here on camel back. There is much to be done in this district."

15

In 1891, while still at Harrar, he began to suffer from a swollen knee-cap. The infection, which was probably tubercular and not syphilitic, spread rapidly. He became incapable of all movement, and was borne in a litter to the coast. At Aden the English doctor diagnosed acute synovitis and advised an immediate return to Europe. Rimbaud was carried in agony to the steamer: on arrival at Marseilles his leg was at once amputated. For months he remained in the hospital at Marseilles, trying pitiably to adapt himself to crutches, and eventually to an artificial limb. The crutches only caused him acute pain under the arms; the artificial leg inflamed the amputated stump. In despair he went back to his mother's farm near Charleville, hoping there to recover his moral, if not his physical, health. But gradually the pain spread to all his limbs. He could not sleep. He was in constant agony. By July his right arm began to stiffen: by August he decided to return to Marseilles. The horror of this, his last, journey has been pathetically described by his sister in the biography produced by Monsieur Paterne

Berrichon. For a moment, when changing trains in Paris, he seems to have wished to die in the city which had seen his first bitter adventures. But the evening was gloomy with summer rain, and the South was calling him. On arrival at Marseilles he entered the Hospital of the Conception, and from the first the doctors realised that his case was hopeless. After three months' useless agony he died on November 10, 1891, at the age of thirty-seven. He was buried at Charleville.

The night before he died he had dictated a letter to the Agent of the Messageries Maritimes, asking to be carried on board the next boat leaving for Egypt.

IV

"SAGESSE"

Le bonheur de saigner sur le cœur d'un ami,
Le besoin de pleurer bien longtemps sur son sein,
Le désir de parler à lui, bas à demi,
Le rêve de rester ensemble sans dessein !

Le malheur d'avoir tant de belles ennemies,
La satiété d'être une machine obscène,
L'horreur des cris impurs de toutes ces lamies,
Le cauchemar d'une incessante mise en scène !

IV

1

In September 1873 Paul Verlaine had been transferred from Brussels to the gaol at Mons, where he was to remain for sixteen months. He has left a detailed and vivid account of this, as indeed of all his imprisonments. The "De profundis" of Paul Verlaine was, however, written and published some twenty years after the event, when he could well afford to laugh at his past humiliations. It was written in the full glow of the Verlaine legend, written by the light of a green lamp in a ward of the Hospital Broussais, written irresponsibly by one who had nothing more to lose in this life or to hope for in the next. The book is therefore a jaunty document, a cheery essay in exhibitionism, and to some extent it is misleading. It is true, indeed, that the early despair of "qu'as-tu fait toi que voilà ?" was soon to be succeeded by a mood of docile resignation: it is true that his subsequent conversion cast a glow of almost heroic expiation over his sufferings in prison: it is true, also, that Verlaine, who always liked discipline so long as he was not

expected to resist it, did not resent too acutely the rigours and humiliation of prison life. But it is a mistake to suppose that he was happy: and scattered among the mystic elevations of *Sagesse* we find poems which are redolent of his despair:

Un grand sommeil noir
Tombe sur ma vie:
Dormez, tout Espoir,
Dormez, toute Envie!

Je ne vois plus rien.
Je perds la mémoire
Du mal et du bien . .
O la triste histoire!

Je suis un berceau
Qu'une main balance
Au creux d'un caveau . . .
Silence, silence!

And then he was frightened: afraid of himself chiefly, of how he was to rebuild his shattered life: "Triste corps," he cries, "combien faible et combien puni!" It was difficult to remain cheerful when "in an infinite monotony passes the long grey regiment of days"; and he was bored: "L'ennemi se déguise en l'Ennui"; he disliked the succession of menial and puerile tasks which were imposed upon him; the cleaning of his cell; the so scrupulous necessity of folding his blanket. And then there was the silence, the loneliness, those steel staircases, those white walls, within which life and time were suspended, within which "Les toujours" became "les jamais."

Du fond du grabat
As-tu vu l'étoile
Que l'hiver dévoile ?
Comme ton cœur bat.

And at night-time would come the rumble of trains passing out to freedom and adventure: "O ces wagons," he cries, "qui vont dévaler dans la plaine."

2

On arriving at the gaol at Mons, Verlaine was received, "I must admit, with extreme simplicity." He was made to take a bath: his clothes were removed, and he was brought his prison uniform, a leather cap, a shirt, a pair of coarse green trousers, and a blue linen mask to hide him when he left his cell. And then he was shaved. But he did not mind all this. Unlike Oscar Wilde, he did not feel himself a zany. After some time, owing to his mother's efforts on his behalf, he was given better treatment. He was moved to cell No. 252, where there were a real bed and a table. He was allowed books, ink and paper. He read the whole of Shakespeare in English and the Notes of Dr. Johnson. He read endless English novels in the Tauchnitz Edition, and conceived the idea of translating "that admirable novel *Ellen Middleton*, by Lady Gullerton." He amused himself by chewing paper into pellets and flicking them against the grating of his door. He made friends with

the gaolers: he taught one of them to read and write; he was on good terms with the Governor, and above all with Monseigneur Gaume, the prison Chaplain. And every Thursday and Sunday his mother would come to see him, and they would blow kisses at each other across the gratings by which they were separated, and sometimes she would manage to pass a copy of the *Figaro* through the bars.

He was in correspondence all this time with Edmond Lepelletier, and some of the letters have been preserved. There is first the question of the publication of *Romances sans paroles*, the manuscript of which had been sent to Lepelletier in May of 1873. After the scandal of the Brussels proceedings no Paris publisher would look at the volume, and so Lepelletier, with unfailing loyalty, published it himself at Sens, where he was then editing a political news-sheet. No copies of the work were sold publicly, but, at Verlaine's request, copies were sent to all his friends, including one to "Monsieur Swinburne de Londres." The question arose also as to whether a copy should be sent to Mathilde: Verlaine felt incapable to advise on this question. "Poor gaol-bird that I am," he wrote, "I have no tact now in these sort of things." A copy was finally sent to Mathilde by Lepelletier, but was not acknowledged; nor, when we consider the poem, "Birds in the Night," and the whole tone of the volume, is this surprising. This first edition of *Romances sans paroles* passed therefore

unperceived: its second edition in 1887 was, however, to create a sensation.

For the rest, his letters to Lepelletier at this time reflect the constant longing for his wife, who was then, as indeed often during his life, becoming a fierce obsession. He was convinced that if she were a free agent she would agree to a reconciliation: it was Monsieur Mauté who was preventing her, mesmerising her into cruelty: his hatred of the man flamed into impotent fury. These paroxysms of rage would be succeeded by intervals of humorous resignation: after all, it was so comforting to be in prison: one was not envied; one was not obliged to argue; one was not even despised. It had its compensations and even its beauties; some pleasing effects, for instance, of grisaille:

Dame souris trotte
Noire dans le gris du soir,
Dame souris trotte
Grise dans le noir.

All this lives in the brave and rollicking poem which he wrote on his release:

J'ai naguère habité le meilleur des châteaux
Dans le plus fin pays d'eau vive et de coteaux:
Quatre tours s'élevaient sur le front d'autant d'ailes,
Et j'ai longtemps, longtemps habité l'une d'elles.

.

Une chambre bien close, une table, une chaise,
Un lit strict où l'on pût dormir juste à son aise,
Du jour suffisamment et de l'espace assez,
Tel fut mon lot durant les longs mois là passés,

.

Maintenant que voici le monde de retour,
Ah ! vraiment, j'ai regret aux deux ans dans la tour,
Car c'était bien la paix réelle et respectable,
Ce lit dur, cette chaise unique et cette table. . . .
. . . Donc, j'étais heureux avec ma vie,
Reconnaissant de biens que nul, certes, n'envie.
O fraîcheur de sentir qu'on n'a pas de jaloux !
O bonté d'être cru plus malheureux que tous ! . . .
D'ailleurs, nuls soins génants, nulle démarche à faire.
Deux fois le jour ou trois, un serviteur sévère
Apportait mes repas et repartait muet. . . .
C'était la liberté (la seule !) sans ses charges,
C'était la dignité dans la sécurité !
O lieu presque aussitôt regretté que quitté,
Château, château magique où mon âme s'est faite,
Frais séjour où se vint apaiser la tempête
De ma raison allant à vau-l'eau dans mon sang,
Château, château qui luis tout rouge et dors tout blanc !

3

The central fact in Verlaine's experience in prison is, however, his re-conversion to the Catholic faith, and this requires to be dealt with in greater detail.

One morning, some eight months after Verlaine's arrival, the Governor himself entered cell No. 252. "My poor friend," he began, "I have bad news for you. Read this . . ."; and he gave him an official paper from which Verlaine learnt that his wife had obtained from the "Tribunal civil de la Seine" an order of legal separation. Verlaine flung himself on the bed in a bitter access of weeping. An hour later he sent for the prison Chaplain.

Monseigneur Gaume, the Chaplain of Mons gaol, was a kind but prudent man. He had had long experience of such conversions. He treated Verlaine with gentleness but with some suspicion. He began by giving him a tract. But Verlaine was not at first convinced by the perusal of this catechism: he objected to its syntax; he was irritated by its calm platitudes; he was on the verge of a reaction; and then Monseigneur Gaume, with real intuition of the poet's emotional nature, told him to skip the early chapters and to read on about the Holy Sacrament. The sensuous mysticism with which the Catholic Church has clothed her supreme ceremonies, came as a revelation to Verlaine. His conversion was immediate. It was hysterical. Below the little crucifix in his cell there hung a lithograph of the Sacred Heart. It was not a good lithograph: Verlaine mentions expressly that it was a bad lithograph: but it portrayed, adequately enough, a Christ who radiated with forgiveness and pity. "I do not know," writes Verlaine, "what or who it was that then lifted me so suddenly, that flung me half undressed from my bed, that prostrated me sobbing and in tears before that crucifix and before its companion picture, evocatory of the strangest and, to my eyes, the most sublime devotion of the Catholic Church."

Next morning he at once sent for Monseigneur Gaume. The miracle had been accomplished. The scales had dropped from the sinner's eyes. The gift of grace had fallen upon him. Monseigneur

Gaume was gratified but still cautious. He would wait before hearing Verlaine's confession: the hysteria must first have subsided: meanwhile Verlaine should calm himself: all would be well.

The confession when it came was for Verlaine an orgy of self-revelation: it was long; it was lurid; it was "infinitely detailed." And the strange, the marvellous thing was that Monseigneur Gaume was *not* horrified: he was not even shocked: in fact, he formulated quite gratuitous and specific questions as to other unmentionable offences which even Verlaine's fertile imagination had never contemplated; and from it all came, not absolution as yet, but benediction, the feeling of an unburdened conscience, a little pride, even, that there were others, perhaps many others, even worse than himself. "On est fier souvent, quand on se compare." A few weeks later he received the coveted absolution and was admitted to Communion. "From that day," he writes, "the duration of my captivity seemed short to me: had it not been for my mother, I should say too short."

On the 16th January 1875, at the age, that is, of nearly thirty-one, Verlaine obtained his release. With his customary docility in the face of superior force, he had behaved admirably while in prison, and had thus earned the benefit of a reduction of his sentence. He was met by his mother and escorted with other felons to the not too hospitable soil of France. From there he and his mother proceeded to Fampoux to stay with the Dehées.

4

The most tangible and the only permanent result of Verlaine's imprisonment and conversion was the composition of the important poems subsequently published under the title of *Sagesse*.

This small volume represents, it is true, what was best in Verlaine during his months of imprisonment, but it does not represent all that he then composed. Practically the whole of *Parallèlement*, with its series of bawdy poems, was written at Mons, and so also was a great portion of what was later to figure in *Jadis et naguère*. It was at one time Verlaine's intention to publish the whole collection in one volume to be entitled *Cellulairement*, and to interlard among the religious poems of *Sagesse* the pieces which now figure in his more pagan publications. Even as it stands, however, it was five years before any publisher would accept *Sagesse*, and even then the book was issued at Verlaine's expense and by a Catholic librarian, to whom fortunately his past was at that time unknown.

Sagesse is considered by most French critics to be the supreme achievement of Verlaine's poetical talent, or, if you prefer it, of his genius. The English reader will perhaps be disinclined to endorse this judgement. In the first place, the majority of the poems are religious in character, and to the Anglo-Saxon ear the hackneyed phrases of religious

expression adapt themselves awkwardly, and with a faint sense of farce, to the gay precision of the French language. This impression is illogical, of course, and fortuitous, but it arises from the first, and from the first it casts a shadow of unreality over *Sagesse*. The sense of unreality is increased by the actual circumstances of Verlaine's conversion; by the sobbing impulsiveness of his self-humiliation; by the cheery acceptance of the ensuing absolution. As Mr. George Moore has said, Verlaine had "abandoned himself to the Church as a child to a fairy-tale." The whole business, to our slow-moving minds, was too hectic, too scrambled, to be very real; and in addition there is the undeniable fact that while writing *Sagesse* he was also toying with *Parallèlement*. For some of us this unreality will cause the poems of *Sagesse* to seem insincere; to others it will merely make them dull. Personally I do not feel that this charge of insincerity has much meaning. Verlaine was too self-centred to be self-conscious. He was too intimate to be insincere. His very conception of including in *Sagesse* the pornographic poems of the same period indicates his intention of presenting a complete picture of his emotions during that intricate sojourn. Taken as such a picture the poems are real enough. All through his life, and after every fresh disaster, Verlaine had always searched wildly for the nearest support. He had clutched at Mathilde, he had clutched at Rimbaud, he now clutched at the Holy Catholic Church. But he

wanted more than mere support: he wanted forgiveness, he wanted unremitting comprehension, he wanted appreciation, and, above all, furiously and passionately he wanted love. And all this the Church was to bring him, mystically indeed, and with some ambiguity, but at least tangibly, in the form of the Sacred Heart, the Confession and the Holy Eucharist. The gentle magnificence of the Catholic ideal, "énorme et délicat," was to save his soul; but he never fully understood it. For him religion was always to remain an anthropomorphic business. He had always liked being "even as a little child." To his relief he discovered that in the Christian Church this was a positive advantage.

How then can there be any question of insincerity? Verlaine was panting for a certain form of solace, a form which no human agency could give him, and in the Church he found abundantly and sincerely what he desired. The remarkable poem which he wrote after his absolution, and which is conceived in the form of a dialogue between himself and Christ, constitutes a curious indication of his quite personal conception of the deities. God tells Verlaine that he is not only forgiven, but is loved, and that he may return this love:

J'ai répondu: "Seigneur, vous avez dit mon âme.
C'est vrai que je vous cherche et ne vous trouve pas.
Mais vous aimer! Voyez comme je suis en bas,
Vous dont l'amour toujours monte comme la flamme.

"Vous, la source de paix que toute soif réclame,
Hélas ! voyez un peu tous mes tristes combats !
Oserai-je adorer la trace de vos pas,
Sur ces genoux saignants d'un rampement infâme ?

"Et pourtant je vous cherche en longs tâtonnements."

And Christ replies :

"Il faut m'aimer ! Je suis l'universel Baiser,
Je suis cette paupière et je suis cette lèvre
Dont tu parles, ô cher malade, et cette fièvre
Qui t'agite, c'est moi toujours ! il faut oser

"M'aimer ! . . ."

To which Verlaine in turn replies :

"Seigneur c'est trop ! Vraiment je n'ose. Aimer qui ? Vous ?
O ! non ! Je tremble et n'ose, O Vous aimer ! je n'ose,
Je ne veux pas ! je suis indigne. Vous, la Rose
Immense des purs vents de l'Amour, ô Vous. . . .

"Quoi, *moi, moi,* pouvoir *Vous* aimer ! Êtes-vous fous ? "

And again the voice of Christ :

"Il faut m'aimer. Je suis Ces Fous que tu nommais,
Je suis l'Adam nouveau qui mange le vieil homme,
Ta Rome, ton Paris, ta Sparte et ta Sodome."

A strange poem this : excessive, impassioned and at moments grotesque ; but surely a sincere poem, and still more surely one that is beautiful, and almost, to use an ill-used word, sublime ? Then, again, there is the gentleness of the Catholic ideal :

"Je suis la douceur qui redresse
J'aime tous et n'accuse aucun . . ." ;

and the calm to which it will lead him, the help to forget the past, the strength to face the future.

And he will need all his strength. Already there are doubts as to his own power of resistance; what if his "yesterdays were to devour his fair to-morrows"? what if the "old madness were already on the way"? Yes, he will need strength, as much as he can get, and meanwhile he will begin with remorse and good resolutions, his "Christian heart will sing the song of purity." He will "love none but his mother Mary." And to the altar of divine forgiveness he will bring all the little that he is and holds:

O mon Dieu, vous m'avez blessé d'amour
Et la blessure est encore vibrante,
O mon Dieu, vous m'avez blessé d'amour.

.

Voici mon sang que je n'ai pas versé,
Voici ma chair indigne de souffrance,
Voici mon sang que je n'ai pas versé.

.

Voici mes pieds, frivoles voyageurs,
Pour accourir au cri de votre grâce,
Voici mes pieds, frivoles voyageurs.

.

Vous connaissez tout cela, tout cela,
Et que je suis plus pauvre que personne,
Vous connaissez tout cela, tout cela,

Mais ce que j'ai, mon Dieu, je vous le donne.

5

Through all these ecstatics, as through the whole of Verlaine's life, runs the bitter thread of his regret for Mathilde:

Tes yeux sont aussi morts depuis les aventures,
Ta grimace est la même et ton deuil est pareil :
Telle la lune vue à travers des mâtures,
Telle la vieille mer sous le jeune soleil.

But he is not without hope—hope which " glimmers like a pebble in a hollow "—those dear hands of his wife will in their turn make the gesture of forgiveness; in the end it will be she who will consecrate his conversion. And so he sends her *Sagesse* in a poem plaintive and appealing :

Écoutez la chanson bien douce
Qui ne pleure que pour vous plaire.
Elle est discrète ; elle est légère :
Un frisson d'eau sur de la mousse.

Écoutez la chanson bien sage.

Mathilde was not to forgive him. Life was not to become easy. But the fact remains that for six years after his conversion Verlaine abstained from drink—or at least he abstained from absinthe.

6

After his release from Mons, Verlaine had, as already related, proceeded to Fampoux with his mother. An intense restlessness descended upon him : he was not happy. On the one hand his relations at Fampoux took little pains to hide from him that he was in disgrace : it was evident that it was irksome to them to have this gaol-bird cousin on the farm : it was evident that he was

not welcome. And then there was always that gnawing obsession of his wife, and the blank, bare problem of the future. After a few days he proceeded to Paris to interview a lawyer. Could nothing be done to rescind the order of legal separation? Could nothing be done to restore to him, if not his wife, at least his child? The lawyer was not hopeful: the interview was short and unsatisfactory. The next day Verlaine received a letter in which his lawyer explained finally that there was no prospect of redress. In despair he appears for a moment to have contemplated placing himself once and for all beyond the reach of the slings and arrows of an outrageous world. He missed the claustral silence of Mons. He missed the muffled regularity of his prison existence: he felt helpless and abandoned in the grip of cruel circumstances. In a sudden emotional impulse, he set off for Chimay with the intention of entering a Trappist Monastery. On arrival, however, things failed to dĕvelop with the dramatic speed which his tense nerves desired and expected. He was kept waiting: his name, address and occupation were entered in a book: for an hour he sat lonely in an ante-room: at last he was interviewed: they asked him questions—ordinary practical questions—none of the penetrating mysticisms of Monseigneur Gaume. Verlaine was chilled: his impulse of self-immolation oozed from him: he returned, once again a free man, to Paris.

It seems that during the few weeks which followed, Verlaine was actually allowed by M. Mauté to see his infant son. There are endless pictures in his letters of this period of himself doing the heavy father, his son in cocked hat and sword riding upon his back. The pictures with which Verlaine illustrated his letters were generally based upon fact, and in spite of subsequent assertions that he had never seen his boy, it appears certain that once or twice during those weeks they played together on the Mautés' hearth-rug. But Mathilde remained invisible, and was to remain so all her life.

7

All this took place in the last weeks of January and the early days of February 1875. Towards the end of that month Verlaine, having obtained Rimbaud's address, dashed off to Stuttgart—with the results already mentioned. He returned in March to grapple once more with the problem of his future. His mother's small fortune had already been seriously diminished, at first by the rash speculations of her husband, and more lately and seriously by the follies of her son. The legal expenses of the appeal in Brussels, and the subsequent calls made upon her while Verlaine was in prison, had hewn further gaps in her capital. She could no longer afford to maintain Verlaine in idleness. An advertisement was inserted in the

English press in which Verlaine offered in return for board and lodging to give lessons in the French language. The advertisement was answered by Mr. Andrews, of the Grammar School at Stickney, near Boston, Lincolnshire, and Verlaine left at once for England to enter upon his new functions.

It was not pleasant to see London again: it was not pleasant to think back on that hot June evening two years ago in Camden Town. The memory of Rimbaud rose and tortured him:

> Angels! seul coin luisant dans ce Londres du soir,
> Où flambe un peu de gaz et jase quelque foule,
> C'est drôle que, semblable à tel très dur espoir,
> Ton souvenir m'obsède et puissamment enroule
> Autour de mon esprit un regret rouge et noir.

It was in a mood such as this, if not at this actual moment, that he wrote his bitter and limping sonnet to London—the city for which, in happier days, he had conceived a grudging affection:

> Ah! vraiment c'est triste, ah! vraiment ça finit trop mal.
> Il n'est pas permis d'être à ce point infortuné.
> Ah! vraiment, c'est trop la mort du naïf animal
> Qui voit tout son sang couler sous son regard fané.
>
> Londres fume et crie, O quelle ville de la Bible!
> Le gaz flambe et nage et les enseignes sont vermeilles
> Et les maisons, dans leur ratatinement terrible,
> Épouvantent comme un sénat de petites vieilles.
>
> Tout l'affreux passé saute, piaule, miaule et glapit
> Dans le brouillard rose et jaune et sale des *Sohos*
> Avec des *indeeds* et des *all rights* et des *haôs*.
>
> Non vraiment c'est trop un martyre sans espérance,
> Non vraiment cela finit trop mal, vraiment c'est triste:
> O le feu du ciel sur cette ville de la Bible!

So soon as he could, he left for Stickney and the smooth calm of Lincolnshire. Verlaine was happy at Stickney, where he was to remain on and off for one and a half years. He liked Mr. Andrews, whom he describes as "charming, friendly and very cultivated." He liked Mrs. Andrews; he liked her seed cake, her junket, and her gooseberry fool. He liked his pupils even, he enjoyed his lessons. Not only was he a French master, he also gave lessons in drawing. His method of instruction in both branches was original. Verlaine, who had little sense of school-drawing, was extremely adept at caricature. His letters are crossed and recrossed with little scribbly illustrations, showing often an astonishing gift for likeness. His endless pictures of himself give a more vivid impression even than the more skilful drawings of F. A. Cazals, or the three brilliant sketches of William Rothenstein. And the whole is illumined with a sense of humour peculiarly un-French in quality. As a drawing-master Verlaine did not therefore set his pupils to shade cubes and cones, but he would sketch on the blackboard a caricature of some local dignitary, the curate, or the farmer up there beyond the dyke, and his class would copy them faithfully enough, no doubt, and with infinite giggling. So Verlaine felt himself unique and popular, and the calm of the wide Lincolnshire sky settled upon him. "My life here," he writes to Delahaye, "is deliciously calm, and I'm glad of it. I need calm quite atrociously,"

—and then, with the sudden veering of his fluid mind, he concludes "and what news from Stuttgart?" ("Stuttgarce" he calls it). But Rimbaud was not then in Stuttgart; he was at that moment begging in the streets of Vienna.

Verlaine has left a poem about Lincolnshire, the first verse of which is extremely characteristic:

> L'échelonnement des haies
> Moutonne à l'infini, mer
> Claire dans le brouillard clair
> Qui sent bon les jeunes baies.

He had always liked the cool clarity of the North: he had always felt most at peace in flat, easy-going countries below a wide sweep of watered sky.

8

In the late summer of 1876 he left Stickney, parting with regret from the Andrews, and returned to France. His mother was then established at Arras, in a sunny little house, No. 2 Impasse d'Ellbronne, where he joined her, happy once more to enjoy a touch of domesticity. The old household gods were there: the chairs covered in imitation leopard skin, the mahogany table, the picture of his father and mother, the pastel of Paul himself at the age of four, the family photograph album. It was there that Delahaye saw them in 1876, and it is about the album that he has told a curious story. Turning it over, after dinner, he came upon the picture of a school-girl,

with something about her strangely different from the village portraits from Fampoux and Paliseul and the daguerreotypes of the old Metz friendships. He looked up at Verlaine, who nodded grimly, "Yes, it is her." A little further on came an aggressive picture of Rimbaud. With a laugh Verlaine seized it, and fixing it opposite to that of his wife, slammed the book and went cruelly to bed. Next morning his mother had replaced the pictures in their original positions.

In 1877 Verlaine again returned to England. He proceeded to Boston in Lincolnshire, in order to be near the Andrews, and he advertised for pupils. It does not appear, however, that the people of Boston were in the least anxious to acquire the French language, and Verlaine found his time and his expenses weigh heavily upon his hands. Boston was not, however, entirely devoid of diversions. He struck up a friendship with an Italian photographer, whose shop was enlivened by automatic machines, a clock-work organ and a huge skeleton of a whale. Of an evening he would come round after business hours, and the two would sit inside the whale and drink light ale till the small hours. The idea was Verlaine's, and it appears to have afforded him infinite amusement. After a while, however, even this distraction began to pall, and Verlaine again advertised for some regular employment. For a short time he obtained a post at Lymington, but soon left it for Bournemouth, where he acted as

French master in the school of a Mr. Remington, at No. 2 Westbourne Terrace. This institution was a private school for the sons of gentry, and Verlaine was accordingly, and for the first time, ill-treated by his pupils. He was obliged to enforce his authority by means of reprisals, and these in their turn led to an organised system of ragging. Verlaine suffered intensely under all this persecution, and, when one winter day he had been hit by a stone disguised in a snowball, he left England in disgust and returned to Arras.

In *Sagesse* and later in *Amour* are two poems which he has definitely dated from Bournemouth. They both reflect his depression while working with Mr. Remington.

Solitude du cœur dans le vide de l'âme,
Le combat de la mer et des vents de l'hiver,
L'orgueil vaincu, navré, qui râle et qui déclame,
Et cette nuit où rampe un guet-apens infâme,
Catastrophe flairée, avant-goût de l'Enfer !

and again :

La mer est plus belle
Que les cathédrales,
Nourrice fidèle,
Berceuse de râles,
La mer sur qui prie
La Vierge Marie !

. . . .

Oh ! si patiente,
Même quand méchante !
Un souffle ami hante
La vague, et nous chante :
" Vous sans espérance,
Mourez sans souffrance ! "

9

In the summer of 1877 Verlaine left Arras and stayed for some months alone in Paris. He was endeavouring, but unsuccessfully, to secure a publisher for *Sagesse*, and for the poems afterwards scattered throughout *Parallèlement*, *Jadis et naguère* and *Amour*. In some way these summer months of 1877 must have been the most unhappy of his life. He was alone and without employment: he had no prospects and few friends. The humiliation of the Bournemouth episode was still acid to his sensitive nature. Rimbaud had disappeared: people said even that he had died in some far climate; Mathilde was now irremediably obdurate; even his mother was away in the North. To make things worse, his old friends of the Parnassus were already beginning to impose themselves upon public opinion. Their sails were filling gaily to the breeze which was to carry them to the Academy. Verlaine alone of the old le Ricard circle was still unread, unrecognised and unknown, or what was worse, unknowable. The year before had appeared the third and final edition of the *Parnasse contemporain*, and Verlaine had seen himself deliberately excluded from the anthology. Some few of his newer and less reputable friends, to do him pleasure, would sometimes in the friendly French habit dedicate their

occasional verses to him. But even they would not go so far as to render him completely onymous, and at the head of their verses would appear only the discreet " à Monsieur P. V. . . ."

> Las ! je suis à l'Index, et dans les dédicaces
> Me voici Paul V . . . pur et simple. . . .

From all this he was at last to be delivered by a fortunate coincidence. His friend, Ernest Delahaye, had been until lately a master in the Catholic College of Notre Dame at Rethel, in the Department of the Ardennes. The post was now vacant, and Verlaine applied for it. He was accepted and at once left for the College. Verlaine was to remain at Rethel for close on two years, and was there to recover some of the calm of the old days at Stickney. He had a room to himself near the gateway looking out on a lane which led into the country. Here he installed his books and papers: his steel engravings of the Virgin and St. Joseph: his Japanese kakimonos which he had bought in England: his pipes and his manuscripts. Here he would retreat after the day's work and light his lamp, and write there in the sleeping College, while from the lane below would arise, sometimes, the whispers of lovers walking together in the evening. To his colleagues, the priests, he was at first a somewhat problematic figure: reserved, studious, almost morose. His fierce and shattered features, his faun-like eyes, his premature baldness and elliptical skull, con-

trasted strangely with his devout and regular behaviour, his fervid, and at times emotional, catholicism. As time went by, his reserve melted; Verlaine could not remain unsociable for long, and in the end he came to like the priests, and they to like him. He became interested in the small and innocuous gossip of the school life: the gentle arguments of his colleagues: the faint and muffled incidents of an existence almost claustral, certainly secure.

With his pupils, also, things went smoothly in that docile retreat. He taught them Latin; he taught them geography; and above all he taught them English. For the purposes of the latter he adopted the method of at first teaching them to speak in French with a strong English accent, a method far more logical than might at first appear. And in August of 1878 there was an excitement. The Cardinal Archbishop of Rheims came to Rethel: he visited the College and attended the prize-giving. Verlaine was much impressed by this dignitary. As yet he had not met a Prince of the Church: I doubt whether he had met even an Archbishop. In any case he asked and obtained an interview, and the interview led to confession. This ceremony, at once intimate and processional, enabled Verlaine to go off proud and happy on his summer holidays. In Paris he met Charles de Sivry and contemplated collaborating with him in the composition of a comic opera under the apposite title of "The Temptations of St. Anthony."

But Verlaine, who was always revolving schemes for dramatic work, was on this as on the other occasions too lazy to carry his idea to a conclusion.

10

In October 1878 he returned for the Michaelmas term to Rethel, but not to the calm and asceticism of the previous winter. In the first place he began to weary of the dreary round of school life, of the sane but unstimulating conversation of his colleagues. It is probable that his last visit to Paris had revived in him the taste for intellectual companionship. It is possible that it had also revived his taste for drink. We know that since his conversion Verlaine had hitherto been able to resist his abiding thirst for stimulants. The first year at the College he had drunk nothing but a little wine and water: the second year, however, he began after his meals to sip a glass of rum, and then another, and then perhaps three: and in the end there was a bottle in his sitting-room to help him through his vigils. By the spring his visits to the town became more frequent. He would return with a touch of deliberateness in his usual dignity, a faint thickness in his strangely modulated voice. By the end of the summer term his connexion with Rethel was abruptly to terminate. There is some doubt as to the exact reasons for his departure. F. A. Cazals states quite definitely

that he was dismissed after having twice been warned against returning intoxicated to the College : Ernest Delahaye explains that the staff of the College was being reduced, and that Verlaine's post was abolished as a result of this reduction ; the charitable Lepelletier says merely that he left because he wished to. Be this as it may, the month of August 1879 found Verlaine again thrown helpless upon a world beset with pitfalls and with absinthe. But he was not to succumb at once to his degradation. For two years still he was to struggle, with varying success, against his besetting sin, and in this battle he was now to be aided and inspired by the purest, and perhaps the deepest, affection that life was to give him.

II

Among Verlaine's pupils at the Collège de Notre Dame was a farmer's son from the Ardennes, a slim, graceful boy of seventeen, called Lucien Letinois. Verlaine has left us in the volume entitled *Amour* a detailed picture of him whom he was later to love as his adopted son :

Je connus cet enfant, mon amère douceur,
Dans un pieux collège où j'étais professeur.
Ses dix-sept ans mutins et maigres, sa réelle
Intelligence, et la pureté vraiment belle
Que disaient et ses yeux et son geste et sa voix,
Captivèrent mon cœur et dictèrent mon choix
De lui pour fils, puisque, mon vrai fils, mes entrailles,
On me le cache en manière de représailles

Pour je ne sais quels torts charnels et surtout pour
Un fier départ à la recherche de l'amour
Loin d'une vie aux platitudes résignée !

Letinois had first come to Verlaine's notice in the ordinary course of College duty : he had from the outset been attracted by the boy's frank eyes, his deep and gentle voice, and the " sombre beauty of his soul." Gradually, and increasingly as his life at Rethel became less simple, Verlaine came to cling to Lucien as a support in his troubles, as a gentle companion upon whom he could vent his overpowering desire for affection, as an unclouded soul whose simple faith gave fresh vigour to Verlaine's now vacillating convictions. And behind it all was Verlaine's " horror of remaining alone " : his terror at his own unaided weakness : his fear of falling again under the influence of some less ideal companion :

. . . l'affreux besoin de plaire aux gens,
L'affreux besoin de plaire aux gens trop indulgents. . . .

As Verlaine's self-created difficulties at Rethel came to a climax, he became terrified at the prospect of the future. Lucien was leaving the College at the end of the summer term : Verlaine was leaving also. Their ways were to lie apart : they would be separated for ever. Verlaine could not bring himself to face so desolate a prospect. He could not face a lonely return to Paris and an inevitable relapse into the old everyday life of degradation.

. . . la ville où se caille et se lie
Ce passé qu'on boit jusqu'à la lie, . . .

If Mathilde had only shown some hope of forgiveness: if only she had shown even a little interest. But she remained deaf to the appeals which from time to time he would still send her:

J'ai rêvé d'elle, et nous nous pardonnions
Non pas nos torts, il n'en est en amour,
Mais l'absolu de nos opinions
Et que la vie ait pour nous pris ce tour.
Simple elle était comme au temps de ma cour,
En robe grise et verte et voilà tout.
J'aimai toujours les femmes dans ce goût.
Et son langage était sincère et coi.
Mais quel émoi de me dire au débout:
J'ai rêvé d'elle et pas elle de moi.

He complains bitterly in these poems of *Amour*, the last poems of any value that he was to write. He complains that he was not born to inspire such hatred; that he was born to please: that, poor dreamer that he is, he was born to smile and pray,

Et toujours des cieux attendris dans les yeux.

Mathilde must have been a hard and foolish little thing: she never tried to forgive him, never even held out to him a chance of forgiveness, and finally she married again and passed for ever out of his hopes and prospects.

In that August of 1879, therefore, Verlaine was again struggling in dark ways, and as usual he went off at an impulsive tangent. He would not part with Lucien, he would follow him for ever, he would make of him a second son. And so when Lucien returned to his father's farm at Coulommes,

Verlaine came with him. The charm of country life, to which he had always been sensitive, filled Verlaine with a sudden and startling resolution. He would live for ever in the country: he would never never return to the town: he would buy a farm: Lucien and he would work the farm together: they would be simple and happy and good: they would put the Georgics into practice. A farm was bought at Juniville near Rethel, and not far from Coulommes. From the outset the business side of the adventure was faulty. Verlaine had succeeded in persuading his mother, who was only too glad, poor woman, to welcome anything which might keep her son from Paris, to sell out 30,000 francs of her capital in order to meet the purchase. He was afraid, however, that if it were known that he had plunged into the purchase of land, his wife's lawyers would descend on him for the 1200 francs annual alimony which he had as yet refused to defray. The farm was therefore placed, not in Verlaine's name, nor even in that of his mother, but in the name of Lucien's father, the old farmer Letinois. And hence future complications, especially for Verlaine's mother.

Verlaine was not physically very suited for the labour and industry of a farm. He had by nature a complete lack of all business capacity: by nature also he had been endowed with a quite exceptional gift of physical sloth,—"La paresse," he calls it, "pire encore que l'excès." So while Lucien did his best to keep the farm going, Verlaine spent

hours sleeping upon hay-ricks, watching his two elm trees whispering together, playing piquet, or talking, and, alas! drinking, with the yokels in the village inn. After a few months it was clear that the two were heading straight for financial disaster. There was nothing to do but to abandon the enterprise before it was too late. Verlaine and his mother, taking Lucien with them, left suddenly for Paris. The farm thus derelict was for a while administered by Lucien's father, but in a few months he in his turn went bankrupt, and Verlaine's farm as well as that of old Letinois himself had to be sold up to meet his liabilities. Out of the wreck of this adventure, into which Verlaine had sunk so much of his mother's capital, he was able to rescue only a few hundred francs. But he was not wholly impoverished by the experience: he had tided over what would have proved a dangerous period: he had come to be guided and inspired by his love for Lucien:

> Notre essai de culture eut une triste fin,
> Mais il fit mon délire un long temps et ma joie :
> J'y voyais se développer ton être fin
> Dans ce beau travail qui bénit ceux qu'il emploie ;
>
> .
>
> J'y voyais ton profil fluet sur l'horizon
> Marcher comme à pas vifs derrière la charrue,
> Gourmandant les chevaux ainsi que de raison,
> Sans colère, et criant diah et criant hue.

12

On leaving Juniville, Verlaine and Lucien returned to Paris, while Madame Verlaine travelled on to Arras, to her little sunlit home and garden in the Impasse d'Ellbronne. In a few weeks, however, Verlaine was to be left alone, since the time had come for Lucien to undergo his military service. Their separation, however, was not to be permanent: it had its compensation. Lucien's regiment was quartered at Châlons, and from time to time Verlaine would travel there to visit him. And there would be long walks together in the country, and during parade Verlaine could watch, with pride, the martial evolutions of his adopted son and brother:

> Je te vois encore à cheval
> Tandis que chantaient les trompettes,
> Et ton petit air martial
> Chantait aussi quand les trompettes.

His military service completed, Lucien returned to Paris. Verlaine felt that it would be of value to him to travel and to learn foreign languages. An arrangement for an exchange of lessons in return for board and lodging was therefore made with an English family in London, and in the late autumn of 1880 Verlaine saw his friend off to England. He was again alone, and this time more solitary than ever: there was no Châlons to go to on Sundays: there were only

Lucien's clear and candid letters from which to draw comfort.

> . . . O ses lettres dans la semaine
> Par la boîte vitrée, et que fou je promène,
> Fou de plaisir, à travers bois, les relisant
> Cent fois. . . .

As Christmas approached, these letters began to lose something of their candour; they became stilted: something was going wrong with Lucien. To Verlaine's inquiries Lucien replied, at first with vague evasions, but suddenly there came a confession; he feared that he had gone too far with one of his girl pupils; he feared he was getting into difficulties. Verlaine crossed at once to London, and saw Lucien. The interview appears to have disclosed a situation more entangled than had been supposed from Lucien's letters, and to have induced in Verlaine a mood which may have been one of moral indignation, but which may, on the other hand, have robbed him for the moment of that deep indulgence which he cherished for Lucien's youth. The whole incident is obscure, and is recorded only by Ernest Delahaye and in a few veiled references in Verlaine's poem:

> O l'odieuse obscurité
> Du jour le plus gai de l'année
> Dans la monstrueuse cité
> Où se fit notre destinée!
>
> Au lieu du bonheur attendu,
> Quel deuil profond, quelles ténèbres!
> J'en étais comme un mort, et tu
> Flottais en des pensers funèbres.

La nuit croissait avec le jour
Sur notre vitre et sur notre âme,
Tel un pur, un sublime amour
Qu'eût étreint la luxure infâme ;

Et l'affreux brouillard refluait
Jusqu'en la chambre où la bougie
Semblait un reproche muet
Pour quelque lendemain d'orgie.

Un remords de péché mortel
Serrait notre cœur solitaire . . .
Puis notre désespoir fut tel
Que nous oubliâmes la terre,

Et que, pensant au seul Jésus
Né rien que pour nous ce jour même,
Notre foi prenant le dessus
Nous éclaira du jour suprême.

The interpretation of this poem cannot but remain something of a mystery. In default of further explanation one is bound to accept Verlaine's own version of his attitude on that occasion. "I was bursting," he writes somewhere, "with wisdom and solicitude."

Having extricated Lucien from the muddle in which he had become involved, Verlaine returned to Paris, and shortly afterwards Lucien also left England. From now onwards, however, the friends were not able to live together : Lucien's parents, after their financial disaster, had left the country and had come up to Paris with what they had saved from the wreckage of their fortunes. An odd pair, these two Ardennes peasants, under the heights of Montmartre, the father truculent and confused by the great city, the mother, more adaptable,

flitting about the markets with her bright pippin face. Lucien was obliged to live with them, and Verlaine found himself once more a solitary bachelor. As usual, he became lonely and afraid. He forced his mother to come down from her happy provincial Arras, to leave the Impasse d'Ellbronne, and all her easy accessible Arras friends, and to keep house for her errant son in Paris. Verlaine was wise enough not to risk settling in any of the more deleterious quarters, but found a lodging in the suburbs at Boulogne-sur-Seine, in a "Hôtel-Restaurant," at No. 5 rue de Parchamp. Lucien Letinois, whose early education at the Collège de Notre Dame had been supplemented by Verlaine's private tuition, and by his few months in England, was able to obtain an appointment as usher in a small school in Paris. On Sundays he would come out to visit the Verlaines at Boulogne-sur-Seine, and the poet himself would meet him with loving anticipation at the Gare d'Auteuil.

Âme, te souvient-il, au fond du paradis,
De la gare d'Auteuil et des trains de jadis
T'amenant chaque jour, venus de La Chapelle ?
Jadis déjà ! Combien pourtant je me rappelle
Mes stations au bas du rapide escalier
Dans l'attente de toi, sans pouvoir oublier
Ta grâce en descendant les marches, mince et leste
Comme un ange le long de l'échelle céleste,
Ton sourire amical ensemble et filial,
Ton serrement de main cordial et loyal,
Ni tes yeux d'innocent, doux mais vifs, clairs et sombres
Qui m'allaient droit au cœur et pénétraient mes ombres ?

Après les premiers mots de bonjour et d'accueil,
Mon vieux bras dans le tien, nous quittions cet Auteuil,
Et sous les arbres pleins d'une gente musique,
Notre entretien était souvent métaphysique.
O tes forts arguments, ta foi du charbonnier !
Non sans quelque tendance, ô si franche ! à nier,
Mais si vite quittée au premier pas du doute !
Et puis nous rentrions, plus que lents, par la route
Un peu des écoliers, chez moi, chez nous plutôt,
Y déjeuner de rien, fumailler vite et tôt,
Et dépêcher longtemps une vague besogne.

Mon pauvre enfant, ta voix dans le bois de Boulogne !

13

And so, in these early months of 1880, Verlaine was in a fair way to "se créer une tranquillité." His mother had disposed of the house at Arras, and what remained of the old family belongings, the engravings, the dappled velvet chairs, the album, had been brought down to their rooms in the bright suburban hotel at Boulogne. There at least were the elements of domesticity: the elements of permanence. And he was working at this time, quite seriously. *Sagesse* had been revised and prepared for publication. It was true that the publishers were not enthusiastic, but the book itself was admirable. Moreover, Lepelletier, the ever generous and devoted Lepelletier, was becoming some one respectable: almost some one influential. And he had promised Verlaine to endeavour to secure his reintegration into the Hôtel de Ville. And above all, there was Lucien,

the adopted son, the support and joy of his old age, in whom he would live again the scope, the freedom, but not the licence of his own young years. The future glimmered before Verlaine's tired eyes in roseate colours: he had a home, he had a son, he was on the verge of obtaining employment.

And all this bright sunlight was due to Lucien:

Mon ami, ma plus belle amitié, ma meilleure,
— Les morts sont morts, douce leur soit l'éternité!
Laisse-moi te le dire en toute vérité,
Tu vins au temps marqué, tu parus à ton heure;

Tu parus sur ma vie et tu vins dans mon cœur,
Au jour climatérique où, noir vaisseau qui sombre,
J'allais noyer ma chair sous la débauche sombre,
Ma chair dolente, et mon esprit jadis vainqueur, . . .

Poor Verlaine! his schemes for Lucien's future went even further. He wished him to marry. He wished to find for him some calm and delicate nature who would appreciate Lucien, who would bear him children. There are poems in this strain which recall the earlier sequence of Shakespeare's Sonnets. Yes! Verlaine would at last realise, if only vicariously, the presage of *La Bonne Chanson*.

Le petit coin, le petit nid
Que j'ai trouvés,
.
L'âme aimante au cœur fait exprès,
Ce dévouement,
Viennent donner un dénouement
Calme et si frais
A la détresse de ma vie
Inassouvie
D'avoir satisfait toute envie!

The dénouement which Verlaine sang in these verses, so reminiscent of his older manner, a manner now tragically slipping from him, was to come soon enough, and weighted with unforeseen tragedy.

Quite suddenly Lucien sickened with typhoid and was taken to the Hospital de la Pitié. By the time Verlaine had reached his bedside, the boy was delirious. In a few days he died. For the third time in his life Verlaine had given his whole heart away and saw himself abandoned.

The shock was terrible. "My son is dead," he cries. "Oh! God of mine, your punishment is hard. My son is dead. You take him from me when my poor footsteps ached for this dear guide in my narrow path. You gave him to me, you are taking him away. You gave him, I give you back his purity":

> Et je reste sanglant, tirant
> Mes pas saignants vers le torrent
> Qui hurle à travers mon bois chaste.

Lucien Letinois was buried in the Communal Cemetery at Ivry. His father and mother, with Verlaine and Ernest Delahaye, followed the bier to the cemetery. The coffin was covered with a white pall. "He at least," Verlaine sobbed to Delahaye, "has earned that virginal coverlet. How many young men at his age—I wonder? . . ."

V

MIDDLE AGE

Ils ont passé ma substance au tamis,
Argent et tout, fors ma gaîté française
Et mon honneur humain qui, j'en frémis,
Eussent bien pu déchoir en la fournaise
Où leur cuisine excellemment mauvaise
Grille et bout, pour quels goûts injurieux ?
Sottise, Lucre et Haine qui biaise.
Mes ennemis sont des gens sérieux.

V

1

It was now six years since the date of Verlaine's imprisonment and conversion, and they had been six years, if not wholly of happiness, at least of calm. During the first half of this period, in fact until his second year at Rethel, the stimulus of his faith had proved in itself strong enough to keep him to the paths of virtue. For the last three years his love for Lucien had come to reinforce the bending reed of his religious conviction. It was not, so much, that Verlaine was coming to doubt the truth of the Catholic revelation; his faith was too mystic, too "credo quia absurdum" to be sapped by the ordinary processes of intellect or reason. No, it was not that he was beginning to doubt the truth: it was rather that he was beginning to absorb it. His faith had ceased to be a miraculous external phenomenon, it was becoming an internal habit; it was taking its place in the worn and rickety furniture of his mind, beside those two amiable but useless qualities, his conscience and his will-power. And in this process religion for him began to lose in authority what it gained in intimacy

and in charm: the drug was ceasing to have effect: the miracle was becoming a mere moral quality, the adventure was degenerating into a frame of mind. Verlaine was never to repudiate religion: even in the last squalid years he would, quite often, fling himself hiccoughing upon its bosom: but it was henceforward to lose its guiding potency, and it is from the day of Lucien's death that we can trace the decline towards complete moral and mental degradation.

Verlaine, as usual, foresaw quite clearly what was coming, and he wrote a poem about it:

Un projet de mon âge mûr
Me tint six ans l'âme ravie,
C'était, d'après un plan bien sûr,
De réédifier ma vie.

.

Or, durant ces deux fois trois ans,
L'essai fut bon, grand le courage.
L'œuvre en aspects forts et plaisants
Montait, tenant tête à l'orage.

.

Furieux, mais insidieux,
Voici l'essaim des mauvais anges.
Rayant le pur, le radieux
Paysage de vols étranges,

Salissant d'outrages sans nom,
Obscénités basses et fades,
De mon renaissant Parthénon
Les portiques et les façades.

.

And what was more, his troubles did not come singly. Lepelletier failed to secure his reinstatement in the Hôtel de Ville. It is characteristic of

Verlaine that he should ever have conceived such reinstatement possible. He had been connected with the Commune; he had deserted his post for ten years; he had been imprisoned in circumstances of such unusual scandal. No one but he could seriously have imagined that any public official could be reinstated after such excesses. But Verlaine's optimism was extremely individual, and with all its silliness is rather engaging. Even at that date, ten years after their separation, he was still indignant with Mathilde for not permitting a reconciliation. He refers to her in the most vindictive terms: "Démon femelle, triple peste, gueuse inepte, lâche bourreau, horrible, horrible, horrible femme."

And, finally, he failed to induce any publisher to accept the manuscript of *Sagesse.*

2

We find him, therefore, in these early days of 1881 already older than his thirty-eight years, and saddened by the complexity of how to live through the years of life which still remained to him. His mother's money was rapidly dwindling: he was falling back into his old habits of promiscuous absinthes: and at every avenue leading to a decorous middle age rose the spectre of his own past forbidding him an entrance. After a time, however, the prospect became less gloomy.

He had for weeks been hawking the manuscript of *Sagesse* from publisher to publisher, when one day he chanced upon the "Société Générale de Librairie Catholique," whose Director, Monsieur Palmé, consented to publish the volume. Monsieur Palmé was not, however, prepared to take many risks, and Verlaine was himself obliged to furnish 600 francs for a frail edition of only 500 copies. A further breach was thereby made in the weak defences of Madame Verlaine's capital, but it at least gave Verlaine the opportunity of seeing himself again in print above the sign of a Paris bookseller, and of again being able to send copies of the volume to those who remained, and to some who certainly did not remain, his friends. On this occasion Verlaine was more than usually liberal with his author's copies. He sent them to the Parnassiens; he sent them to the younger poets whose acquaintance he had begun to make at the Café François Premier; he sent one to his wife; he sent one to the Empress Eugénie; he sent one even to Pope Leo XIII. In spite of this, the first edition of *Sagesse* was a complete failure. The copies which remained after Verlaine's dispersal of them among his friends were either burnt or consigned to the cellars of the "Société Générale de Librairie Catholique," from where, in later years, Monsieur Palmé would sulkily unearth them under pressure from the bibliophiles. The fact was that neither Monsieur Palmé ("Bamboula" as Verlaine called him) nor the great Parisian public quite

understood *Sagesse*. For the devout it was too literary: for the literary it was too devout. For Monsieur Palmé it was simply one of his many tracts which had not "caught on." He was distressed about this. He was distressed that Monsieur Verlaine's talents should not be directed into a more remunerative channel: remunerative alike for the Catholic party, for the Société Générale and for M. Verlaine. He urged Verlaine to try his hand at political writing: he suggested even that he might write satires upon the atheism of the French Republican Administration. Verlaine endeavoured to do so. He wrote some of the pieces which were to appear later on in *Invectives*; but they did not please M. Palmé. They were too secular, too racy to emanate fittingly from the austere catholicism of the Société Générale. Monsieur Palmé begged Verlaine to try again. He even gave him a sample of the "kind of thing" he would like him to produce. With his usual docility Verlaine took the sample off with him and tried hard to catch the required atmosphere. But it was no use. "I have tried," he said to Delahaye, "to write the sort of stuff Bamboula wants me to, but I can't. I simply can't do it." And so ended his connexion with the Maison Palmé.

3

In his perplexity Verlaine again had recourse to the unfailing Lepelletier, and on this occasion the

latter was able to be of real assistance. Lepelletier was at that time employed upon the staff of the *Réveil*, a topical paper which was later to blossom successfully into the *Écho de Paris*. The *Réveil* in its early days was almost exclusively literary in character, and it was thus possible to find in its columns some small opening for Paul Verlaine. He was allowed, from time to time, to contribute to a series of articles which were being published on topical aspects of contemporary Parisian life. The articles were signed "Jean qui rit" or "Jean qui pleure" according as they were gay or grave, and those of them which are by Verlaine have subsequently been published in the *Mémoires d'un veuf*. These sketches are merely fugitive pieces of little interest beyond the fact that they constitute Verlaine's first essays in continuous prose. He was afterwards somewhat unduly to exploit this talent of writing prose loquaciously and well, and some of the unfortunate exhibitionism of his later years was due to the facility with which he could wring a few francs out of Léon Vanier by his indiscretions in prose.

Be this as it may, neither *Sagesse* nor the Parisian sketches brought Verlaine either fame or fortune. What made it all so bitter was that whereas his old colleagues of the Parnasse were by then acclaimed and reputable, Verlaine was completely forgotten. In his *Documents littéraires*, published in 1881, Zola has but a casual reference to "a Monsieur Paul Verlaine—now disappeared."

Leconte de Lisle, hearing Verlaine's name mentioned, merely raised his eye-glass and exclaimed: "Verlaine? Goodness, is he still alive? He'll never die, that fellow—except on the scaffold." This story was repeated to Verlaine, who conceived from it the most intense hatred of Leconte de Lisle, perhaps the only permanent enmity which his fluid nature ever cherished. There is an absurd story of a casual manifestation of this hatred. From time to time Verlaine and Leconte de Lisle would pass in the street and would salute each other coldly. But on one occasion when Verlaine was in a bar, Leconte de Lisle came in and asked for a ten-centimes cigar. Verlaine at once rummaged in his pocket, and drawing out his total fortune of sixty centimes, expended the whole upon the triumph of a cigar six times more glorious than that of his rival. A more serious manifestation was the poem entitled "Portrait académique," which he hurled at Leconte de Lisle upon his election to the Academy.

4

By the year 1882 Verlaine was settling down to a life not devoid either of interest or of absinthe. He was still living with his mother over the Hôtel-Restaurant at Boulogne-sur-Seine, but his days and often his nights were spent in the heart of Paris. As time went on, the family lodging became

less of a home than a hotel, less of a hotel than a restaurant. Early in the morning he would creep down the stairs and join the cabmen in their coffee, he himself taking generally the absinthe which was to help him on to Paris. And then would come a day of idling through Paris, ending up generally in the Café François Premier. It was in this café, which was always to remain his favourite resort, that Verlaine, through the introduction of Charles Morice, first made the acquaintance of the younger writers who were springing up below the marble and cypresses of the Parnassus. At first they saw in him only a renegade from the Olympian Camp, a fallen angel with the evident intention of continuing to fall. The *Poèmes saturniens* and the *Fêtes galantes* were admirable in their way: the *Bonne Chanson* was good but a little puzzling: of the rest, as yet, they knew nothing, and at first it was Verlaine's personality rather than his poems which received their plaudits. Verlaine was asked to contribute something to the organ of this little group, the *Lutèce*. He set himself down to write the literary sketches which were afterwards recast and published under the title *Les Poètes maudits*, and which constitute, with the exception of *Mes Hôpitaux*, the most successful of his prose works.

The article on Arthur Rimbaud created something like a sensation. The works of that strange genius were at that time unknown to the younger generation: after Verlaine's article he suddenly glittered with the resplendence of a literary planet,

and Verlaine in his turn shone with reflected glory. Stimulated by the success of his article on Rimbaud, Verlaine proceeded to write a similar one upon himself, choosing, however, to cover his identity under the touching, if transparent, anagram of "Le pauvre Lélian." Here again the effect was electrical. Verlaine was able not only to explain the intimacy of his own methods, but to draw attention to some of his best poems, notably those of the *Romances sans paroles*, which had been only privately printed. The younger generation began to look upon him with a wild surmise: what if, after all, this strange untidy neuropath was a great poet, a modern Villon? What if, after all, he was the greatest of French lyricists?

The studies of Rimbaud and "Le pauvre Lélian" were followed by others. There were articles on Tristan Corbière, on Mallarmé, and of course on his favourite Marceline Desbordes-Valmore. The effect of the first two articles was maintained: Verlaine became a literary figure: he became one of the lions of the *Lutèce* circle.

All this was very gratifying in its way, but there were pitfalls and disadvantages in such popularity. As his fame increased, the young Bohemia of Paris would flock to the François Premier to see and hear the modern Villon—the pauvre Lélian—the intimate friend and impresario of Arthur Rimbaud. And this would entail long hours on the settees of the François Premier: it would entail

a succession of proffered and accepted absinthes upon the white marble tables. After all, these young men expected Verlaine to be loquacious: they expected him to be reminiscent, even mawkish: they expected him to get drunk. And poor Verlaine rather enjoyed it all: he liked to talk about himself; he liked to be poignant and remorseful about the past; he liked the tirades, the denunciations, the puns and the pornography. And so gradually the Hôtel-Restaurant down there at Boulogne-sur-Seine came to see less of him; and when sometimes of an early morning he would return there unsteadily, his head congested with the fumes of absinthe and the plaudits of his young admirers, his mother would peck at him like some gay and grisly hen, and the calm and bitter memory of Lucien Letinois would rise and stab him to the heart.

5

It must have been after some such protracted confessional at the François Premier that in the autumn of 1883 Verlaine returned home one morning a prey to the darkest and most penetrating remorse. We do not know what had happened, or what his mother may have said to convince him. He appears, however, to have had a lightning vision of the morass into which he was falling and to have impetuously flung himself in the opposite direction. In October 1883, Verlaine and his

mother precipitately left Paris, and, with what remained of the poor woman's dowry, bought another farm at Coulommes, not far from the old experiment at Juniville. The biographers are frankly puzzled by the impulsiveness of this departure. Verlaine was at last obtaining regular literary occupation: he was surrounded by a circle of admiring if juvenile friends: his poems were being recited under the garish gas-globes of the Quartier Latin: he was becoming a "figure parisienne," a metropolitan character. And in a few hours he abandons all this for the problematic comforts and the almost certain failure of a farming venture. The thing would be inexplicable in some one else: in Verlaine, with his passion for superlatives, it is not astonishing.

On this occasion he remained nearly a year and a half at Coulommes. He farmed a little: he wrote a little: he squabbled with his mother, he drank with the farm hands at the inn: he got heavily into debt. On the previous occasion when he had been over at Juniville, the village had still regarded him as the gentleman farmer: as the capitalist who was there only for his hobby. But the failure of the previous adventure was well known in the district: Verlaine was not only foolish, he was poor. And to the rustic mind to be educated, to be poor, and to be a failure, constitute an unforgivable combination. Verlaine became a by-word in the country: the village boys would scowl at him in the day-time, and poke fun at him of an

evening. He became a butt; and this was worse, far worse than the François Premier.

A phase of gloom and irritability descended upon him. He did not want to be respected, but he loathed not being liked. There was a note of resentment in the laughter which he evoked in the village, and he was quick to notice it. It made him unhappy, and nervous, and his evil feelings were discharged on the unoffending head of his old mother. The thing became a village scandal: Verlaine was unkind to his mother; Verlaine beat his mother. Madame Verlaine, who was now seventy-five years of age, had made friends with an officious neighbour, a Mr. Dane. The latter let no occasion slip to turn her against her son: Paul was little more than a drunkard: he was worse than a drunkard; he was mad: one night he would rise and kill her for the few francs she still possessed. The poor old woman was frightened by this insidious trickle of warnings. One night (it was February 8, 1885), when Verlaine was particularly violent, his mother gathered up her meagre belongings and escaped to the protection of Mr. Dane. Verlaine came down next morning to find the house empty. He at once left for Paris. On reaching the Gare St. Lazare he went to an English hotel opposite, to Austin's Hotel in the rue d'Amsterdam, and spent the night in drinking whisky, to which he was unaccustomed. The next morning he travelled back to Coulommes and went straight to his farm. His mother had not returned,

and the people in the village told him slyly that Mr. Dane had been boasting that he had rescued the old woman from her assassin of a son. Verlaine proceeded at once to Dane's cottage, after having fortified himself with an interim visit to the village inn. Pushing past Mr. Dane he burst into the sitting-room where his mother was hiding. The accounts of what followed vary in essential particulars. Verlaine stated subsequently that he threatened, if his mother did not return, to kill *himself*. Mr. Dane, who was listening at the door, gave evidence to the effect that he had threatened to kill *her*; even that the old woman had been struck before his eyes. In any case, Dane summoned the village policeman, and to the joy of the exultant villagers Verlaine was marched off under arrest. On March 24 he was brought up before the magistrate at the county court at Vouziers. His mother corroborated the evidence of her son, but the latter was forced to admit that he had been drunk at the time of the alleged assault. To add to this, the whole village, and Mr. Dane in particular, testified against him. And finally there was Verlaine's own lamentable dossier in the Préfecture de Police in Paris to decide the magistrates against him. He was condemned to a heavy fine, which his doubly victimised mother had to defray, and to one month's imprisonment.

And so, at the age of forty, Paul Verlaine was for the second and last time to meditate within the four walls of a prison cell. For the second time

his experiment in agriculture had had a sad ending: he was by now almost penniless: his wife was about to marry again: he had finally disgraced himself: he had outraged even his own elastic conscience: he was alone in the world: he was over forty: and he was becoming a dipsomaniac. But he did not wholly lose his buoyancy: on being released he took his gaoler with him across the Square to have an absinthe: whatever happened there was always friendship, the green filter and literature. Yes, he could go back to Paris and write. "Ils m'ont plumé," he cried triumphantly, "mais ils m'ont laissé ma plume."

6

It was spring in Paris by the time Verlaine was liberated from Vouziers gaol. He had not been entirely idle during those months at Coulommes: he had been revising old manuscripts, and had clipped and tidied them into the collection which was soon to appear as *Jadis et naguère*. Verlaine always had an astonishing gift for preserving anything that he had written, although he liked to appear, in the admiring circle of the François Premier, as quite indifferent to the ultimate fate of his poems. He would draw them vaguely from among the capes of his huge ulster, scribbled on the backs of letters, across bills, sometimes even on the fever charts of the Hôpital Broussais, or written "sur place" across the white marble

tables of the Café. All this, though extremely effective, was a perfectly calculated part of the Verlaine legend. Even Lepelletier admits that Verlaine in his later manner was "un petit peu cabotin." In any case his indifference to his own manuscript was pure hypocrisy: realising, probably, that the well of his inspiration would shortly become tainted with absinthe, he hoarded with the ferocity of a miser every scrap of paper which he had ever written. And later, when he had found a publisher and a public, he would work them up into a "Volume," padding now and then with later insertions, and eking out his diminishing talent by planting flamingly here and there among the rather forced productions of his middle age some forgotten masterpiece of his early manhood. It is this which makes it difficult to take most of Verlaine's later books as separate entities: with few exceptions, they all came together with a rush the moment he had found his public, and the poems which he collected within their covers date from different periods, with gaps between them sometimes as long as twenty years.

7

Armed with *Jadis et naguère*, therefore, Verlaine arrived in Paris and went straight to Léon Vanier, a young and energetic publisher whom he had met in the favourable circle of the François

Premier. This Léon Vanier was to play a great and predominant rôle in Verlaine's later life. A brisk and friendly little man, with the habit of nervously washing his hands, he had started life as a purveyor of fishing-tackle. It is for this reason that Verlaine in his more ungrateful moments would insult both his publisher and the national sport of France by calling Vanier "un marchand d'asticots." Léon Vanier had opened a publishing business on the quays, at No. 19 Quai Saint Michel, where his successor, M. Albert Messein, to-day somewhat sulkily exploits his tradition. The time was to come when Verlaine was to descend to any depths to wring a few francs out of Vanier's business instincts, but on the whole Vanier, in spite of these same instincts, was a constant if skinflint friend to Verlaine and a source of intermittent income. He was not, as Monsieur Charles Donos has tried to make out, the Maecenas of the fallen poet: he was devoid both of generosity and taste: he was merely an astute business man who realised Verlaine's possibilities as a poet, while despising and almost loving him as a man. There will be more to say of Vanier in a later chapter, but his importance at this moment resides in the fact that he was definitely prepared to pay Verlaine for *Jadis et naguère.*

Hardly, however, had Verlaine arrived in Paris before he developed what he at first took to be water on the left knee, but which was in fact the first symptoms of that acute arthritis which was

henceforward never to leave him. He was at that moment without a home and without a helper: he could not dress himself. After a short struggle with his dignity, he decided to enter a public hospital. For three months, therefore, he remained interned and secure in the Hôpital Tenon at Menilmontant. In the autumn he was sufficiently recovered to leave the hospital, and by then a reconciliation had been effected with his mother. The two had at that time scarcely enough money to find a lodging. Practically all that remained of Madame Verlaine's all too fluid capital had been absorbed by the payment of the fine imposed by the court at Vouziers. They were obliged to settle in a back alley near the Bastille, at No. 6 Cour St. François, rue Moreau. Verlaine himself took the room on the basement, ill-lit and with an earthen floor. His mother, who was seriously ailing, was lodged in a room above him. By Christmas, Verlaine was again crippled by his arthritis, and his knee was encased in plaster of Paris: he could not walk or stand: it was only with difficulty that he could raise himself in bed: and his mother upstairs was dying. He begged and implored that he might be carried to her room, but the staircase was too narrow to admit of his passage. Early in January she died, without Verlaine being able to ask her forgiveness. His mother left him some £160, which was all that remained of her dowry; an old aunt at Arras, who died almost the same time, left him a further

£60. Of this £220 his mother's funeral cost him some £80, and the doctor's bills came to £15 more. On hearing of these legacies, his wife's solicitors descended upon him and appropriated the remainder, leaving Verlaine with only some 100 francs between himself and starvation.

8

The ten years which were to intervene between his mother's death and his own were employed by Verlaine in living up to what was already becoming the Verlaine legend. The younger generation had evolved the portrait of the new Villon, the Socratic schoolboy, the inspired Silenus. Verlaine was expected to be sodden, untidy, argumentative, shameless, cowardly, orgiac, naïf, decadent and religious. At times he was expected to be not only drunk but disgustingly drunk. At other times they looked to him to be autobiographical with a touch of pornography, a touch even of the audacious. At all times his rôle was to " esbrouffer le bourgeois." And sometimes he was expected to take out his lyric violin and with a few strokes of the bow to soar to heights of sensitiveness, untouched as yet by the cold and morose delicacy of French literature. All this in the years between 1886 and 1896 was to become the Verlaine legend. And Verlaine himself was perfectly prepared to don the motley ; he was perfectly ready to become the Falstaff of the Boulevard St. Michel. And,

after all, what alternative was there before him? He was not young, he was not industrious, he was not, of course he was not, respectable. He was sociable and forgiving, he was docile and childish: he had no shame: he had no prospects: he had, unfortunately, no responsibilities. He had a quite definite taste for exhibitionism, he liked extremely telling stories against himself; he preferred the settees of the François Premier to all the forty fauteuils of the Académie Française; if he chose to be disreputable, why shouldn't he be disreputable? And then he could scarcely have been anything else. Yes, for those last ten years motley was the only wear.

As an ordinary member of society there can be no excuse, no allowance for Paul Verlaine. But as the candid vagabond of the last ten years he may evoke a certain grudging acceptance, a tolerant sympathy even, with the English-speaking public. For Verlaine, unlike most Frenchmen, who are too intelligent for so auto-erotic a process, had, in addition to "la gaité française," in addition also to "l'esprit Gaulois," a quite Anglo-Saxon sense of humour. It led in his case, as in its extreme forms it always leads, to the complete annihilation of all will-power. But it leaves behind it a faint aroma of charm which may, who knows, be realised by some of us occidentals. It was not realised by the French. For them a sense of humour must always remain something at once alien and deleterious: they regard it with mingled feelings

of anxiety, resentment and distrust: they have invented for it, and for us its putative possessors, two strange attributes which they call by the mystic if unpleasant names of "phlegm" and "spleen"; in theory it is for them a sulky quality possessed only by an atrabilious British aristocracy; and when they meet it in practice and discover it to be a jovial if epicene business, they are embarrassed and disconcerted: the blood rises flaming to their cheeks. It was not surprising therefore that they regarded, and to some extent still regard, Paul Verlaine as little more than an outrage upon human dignity. And so he is.

9

These last ten years of Verlaine's life divide themselves precisely, not into two periods, but into two categories. There are the months he spent in hospital: there are the months, his *entr'actes* he called them, which he spent in the Quartier Latin. The latter period was more full of incident; the former offers, perhaps, the greater interest. It will be convenient to treat the two separately and to begin with the category of the hospitals, remembering meanwhile that in the *entr'actes* Verlaine was publishing furiously with the new-found Vanier, and that his fame was being blazoned beyond the confines of Paris and France, to the limits of the Old and of the New World.

As already mentioned, Verlaine's first acquaint-

ance with hospital life was the short period which, in 1885, he spent in the Hôpital Tenon. This palatial edifice in the Menilmontant quarter was where Verlaine was to serve his months of "apprenticeship" in the business. The real centre of his hospital life was, however, to be the Hôpital Broussais, in the rue Didot, which he first entered in December 1886. Verlaine always had a weakness for this particular hospital. It consisted of a series of wide-spreading huts connected by arcades and supported upon wooden piles. One had the sense of camping-out in the country: of being, in a way, adventurous; and one lost the galling impression of existing as no more than a burden to the earth: a weight upon the charity of the "Assistance publique." And then there was Doctor Chauffard, who was always ready to shut one of his two kindly eyes, and the arcades to smoke under, and the green lamp beside his sleepless bed at night-time, and the sound of the "ceinture" trains, and the "Get up, lazy" of the nurses in the morning. But it would be better to let Verlaine tell his own story.

Mes Hôpitaux, which Verlaine published in 1891, is perhaps the best of his prose works. It is humorous, elusive and very brave. It is written in the loquacious and slangy style at which no one, until the days of Willy, was to be his equal. Take this, for instance, as a specimen of this style and of his general views upon the uses and abuses of public hospitality:

Zut alors ! Ne sortirai-je donc de Charybde que pour m'engager dans Scylla, et mon nom, que je voudrais purement et bonhommement poétique, va-t-il passer proverbe ? Déjà quelqu'un, qui a cru bien faire, avait dit que si d'autres s'étaient servis de l'hôpital pour y mourir, moi je m'en servais (autant dire en profitais) pour y vivre (autant dire pour vivre).

Pourtant, je vous donne ma parole d'honneur que mon plus vif désir serait de mener l'existence de tant d'autres que je vaux. (Et je parle ici en toute modestie.) Sans luxe,—je n'ai aucun goût luxueux,—sans trop de grandes débauches,—mon actuelle santé s'y oppose formellement et mes principes (car j'ai des principes, ne feignez pas de l'ignorer, ô mes chers camarades !) y auraient quelques objections, sans pose ni excès de méchanceté, ni abus de bonté, un juste milieu entre le pire et le mieux ; pas de vértu, hélas ! mais pas de vice proprement ; ni Alceste, ni pourtant Philinte,—enfin une existence de brave garçon et d'*honnête homme*, dût celui-ci tirer sur le gentilhomme, car fi du " gentleman " !

Hoc erat in votis.

Yes, hospitals were not a bad place on the whole, and one would regret them in the *entr'actes*. At least they represented peace and simplicity. It meant being woken up early ; it meant the continuous smell of phenol and iodoform ; it meant the " intellectual promiscuities," and sometimes the active hostility of his fellow-patients ; it meant the imposition of a rigid discipline, and at times the impertinence of medical students. But it meant other things as well :

La vie est si sotte vraiment
Et le monde si véhément
En fait de méchanceté noire,

Qu'à ce prospect sur l'avenir
Trop prochain, et qu'au souvenir
De toute mon affreuse histoire

Je préfère enfin l'hôpital. . . .

There was in the first place a bed, on one occasion but just evacuated by a defunct predecessor, and there was covering: and food also: and friends privileged to visit him at irregular hours—France, Barrès, Vicaire, Pierre Louys, André Gide, Huysmanns, Cazals, and Robert de Montesquiou. And sometimes there were escapes and escapades, and at night much work to do while the ward was snoring, and above all, the, on the whole, rigid exclusion of intoxicants. I say "on the whole" because of certain references in the book of Ernest Delahaye, and a poem of Verlaine's own which runs discreditably as follows:

N'importe, ah! buvons donc tandis que
Ce docteur a le dos tourné.

Then Verlaine made friends with his fellow-patients: he became interested in the hospital gossip: there was an American millionaire who had fallen on evil days: there was a coachman with delirium tremens: there was a young tenor with tuberculosis. On one occasion Cazals himself was in the hospital, and the two friends would spend all their time together, Cazals sketching Verlaine in his blue dressing-gown and nightcap, and Verlaine smoking his pipe, editing his early verses or singing in his cracked voice some libidinous chanson of

the Paris boulevards. Verhaeren has said somewhere that Verlaine was only really himself when in prison or in hospital.

> D'ailleurs l'hôpital est sain ;
> On s'y berce sur le sein
> De tel ou tel médecin.

This courageous gaiety had, however, its moments of acute depression. There was the contrast between his growing fame as a poet and his condition as a human being, a contrast bitterly underlined on one occasion when an American admirer sent him a tribute of orchids which he was unable, adequately, to dispose of. There were the occasions when he actually felt ill and when the pain in his left knee became unbearable. And there were moments when his fellow-patients, or some of them, objecting to the privileges which the kindly and intelligent doctors were only too disposed to accord him, would throw out hints as to the disgrace of a bourgeois, an educated man, nay, a clerical and a Bonapartiste, occupying the place which should more properly accrue to some deserving member of the proletariat. There was no answer to such criticisms : no answer beyond Verlaine's own " affligeante belle humeur," and the obvious fact that he also was one of the proletariat. But he suffered from all this, and at one curious moment he decided to secure a yet more remote asylum. It was during one of the *entr'actes* when a return to hospital was becoming imminent. Verlaine was observed to stare fixedly

at distant objects, to mutter to himself, and to beat the pavement with the stick that served him as a crutch. To an intimate he admitted that all this was deliberate: his intention was " after some fallacious but successful manifestations of mental derangement " to be taken to a lunatic asylum. His fellow-patients in such a retreat might be more complicated, but at least they would be less critical. But after a while he wearied of playing so elaborate a part: he ceased to beat the pavement, or to mutter: he returned tamely to the Hôpital Broussais.

The following further extract from *Mes Hôpitaux* can testify to the fact that he was not always at his ease living at the expense of the ratepayers:

> J'admets tout cela et que j'ai eu dans mon malheur ce que l'on appelle de la chance. Mais toujours est-il qu'il est dur, après une vie en somme de travail, agrémentée, je le concède, d'accidents où j'ai pris ma large part, et de catastrophes peut-être vaguement préméditées, il est dur, dis-je, à quarante-sept ans d'âge, en pleine possession de la bonne réputation (*du succès*, pour parler l'affreux langage courant) à quoi pouvaient aspirer mes plus hautes ambitions, dur, dur, très dur et plus que dur, de me trouver, mon Dieu! oui, SUR LE PAVÉ, et de n'avoir, pour reposer ma tête et nourrir un corps qui vieillit, que les oreillers et les menus d'une Assistance publique, encore aléatoire, et qui peut se lasser—Dieu, d'ailleurs, la bénisse!—sans qu'il y ait visiblement de la Faute de qui que ce soit, oh! non, pas même et surtout pas de la mienne.

And then, as at Mons and Rethel, he was apt to

become bored in hospital. It was all very well to inquire :

Que me fait cette gaieté vile
De la ville ?

It mattered a great deal. It mattered too much.

10

In the year 1889 there was a curious interlude in this double life of the Hôpital Broussais and the Café François Premier. Verlaine, whose fame was now established, had sold the manuscript of *Bonheur* to two publishers at the same time, namely, to Vanier and to Savine. This strange expedient was eventually to land him into considerable difficulties, but for the moment at least it provided an unprecedented amount of ready money. He decided to undergo a cure and proceeded to Aix-les-Bains. His arrival at that fashionable watering-place all but added another chapter to *Mes Prisons*. "It was all the fault," writes Verlaine, "of the P.L.M. (Préparez les Menottes !) Company, who insist on running their slow trains through the whole of Burgundy and stopping them at all and every station,"—at Vougeot, at Beaune and for two whole hours at Mâcon.

Notre homme ne manqua pas, quelque soif aidant—c'est drôle comme on a toujours soif surtout quand on n'est pas altéré—de descendre examiner en bon touriste sinon en malade trop prudent, les vins offerts sur la route—buffets et buvettes—par de relativement consciencieux

limonadiers ; si bien qu'à Mâcon (tout le monde descend !) il avait chaud et courut à la Saône, dont le cours rapide ne le tenta pas vers un bain, mais sur les bords de laquelle il s'empressa de saluer, comme c'était son devoir, la statue de Lamartine en coup de vent ! avec des bottes superbes et quel beau manteau !

Des réflexions sur la mise comfortable des poètes *in illo tempore* l'occupèrent quelques instants, mais il pleuvait (avec la Saône, que d'eau, que d'eau !).

Entrer dans un café voisin était dicté. Il y but, en guise d'apéritif (fi de l'helvétique Pernod et du bitter d'Outre-Rhin !) une franche bouteille de ce précieux vin français que le noble poète avait tant aimé et, dit-on, un peu vendu non sans profit, et, malheur ! le revoilà plongé, après ces libations à des Mânes illustres, dans telles et telles rêveries relatives au temps béni où les poètes se trouvaient être de grands propriétaires.

Toutes ces cogitations, en dépit d'un dîner passable dûment arrosé, ne furent pas sans assombrir un peu le songeur. Son visage d'ordinaire ouvert et plutôt gai, se fronça, se fronça par degré, finissant par entrer en complète harmonie avec le costume qu'il portait, quelque chose de gris-de-souris avec, par endroits, des détails mal élégants, un bouton sauté, quelques effilochages aux boutonnières, des rires jaunes vers les coutures. Son chapeau mou semblait lui-même se conformer à sa triste pensée, inclinant ses bords vagues tout autour de sa tête, espèce d'auréole noire à ce front soucieux.

It was dark and raining when he arrived at Aix. He drove to a hotel and was told there was no room. The landlady announced this fact with a tone of finality and with one hard eye upon Verlaine's appearance, upon his carpet-bag with the yellow flowers embroidered on it, upon his muffler, which he himself admits was " nuance de

vitrail XIII^e^ siècle," and upon the clothes already indicated in the passage just quoted. Verlaine was hurt: he decided to examine for himself whether there was any truth in her assertion that all the rooms were occupied: without a word to the landlady he stumped upstairs on a vague and sulky mission of inquiry. When he again limped down the staircase it was to find the Commissioner of Police, with assistants, waiting for him in the hall, and the landlady pointing him out as one of a band of hotel robbers. Verlaine was delighted at this unexpected adventure:

> Et défaisant sa jaquette prestement, non sans toutefois quelque satisfaction intime et toute esthétique d'avoir pu un instant passer pour un émule (en un point important) du grand François Villon, le poète poursuivit:
>
> — Voyez, Monsieur, *Vide, Thomas*, videz mes poches.
>
> — *Sufficit*, fit le commissaire de police, homme d'esprit. Vous êtes recommandé à M. le docteur. . . . Allons chez lui.

His cure at Aix was not to do more than check for a few months the virulence of his arthritis. On his return to Paris, it was only but a short *entr'acte* before he was back in hospital, and never again could he afford the luxury of a course of baths.

But the monochrome of this hospital background has now been sufficiently sketched in: it remains to consider the *entr'actes* which, from the biographical point of view, were during these last years to constitute so regrettable a foreground.

VI

THE LAST PHASE

C'est ce qu'on appelle la Gloire !
—Avec le droit à la famine,
A la grande misère noire
Et presque jusqu'à la vermine—
C'est ce qu'on appelle la Gloire !

VI

1

Such of Verlaine's life during these last ten years as was not spent at the Hôpital Broussais, the Hôpital Tenon, the Hôpital Saint Antoine, the Hôpital Bichat, or the Asile de Vincennes, was passed in a state of limping penury in the highways and byways of the Quartier Latin. As has been indicated, the younger generation had already by 1886 begun to regard Verlaine as an institution, almost, indeed, as a master. As the years went by this younger generation became in its turn increasingly self-conscious and independent, and there soon emerged, under the shadow rather than under the tutelage of Mallarmé and Verlaine, the concurrent movements of the Symbolists and the Decadents.

Monsieur Anatole Baju, the impresario of the Symbolist movement and the ex-editor of the *Décadent*, published in the year 1892 an analysis of the literary schools of the moment, of which the following is a summary :

(1) *Decadents.* Verlaine.
Maurice du Plessys (first manner).

(1) *Decadents (contd.)*	Ernest Raynaud. Arthur Rimbaud. Jules Laforgue. Stuart Merrill. Fernand Gregh.
(2) *Symbolists.*	Mallarmé. Jean Moréas (first manner) Charles Morice. Maurice Barrès. Paul Adam. Henri de Régnier. Vielé Griffin. Jean Lorrain.
(3) *Instrumentalists.*	René Ghil. Verhaeren.
(4) *École romane.*	Jean Moréas (second manner). Maurice du Plessys (second manner). Raymond de la Tailhède. Charles Maurras.
(5) *Anarchists.*	Paterne Berrichon. Octave Mirbeau. André Gide.
(6) *Neo-Decadents and Neo-Symbolists.*	Camille Mauclair. [Oscar Wilde.]
(7) *Independents.*	Albert Samain. Pierre Louys.

This classification of M. Baju is entertaining. It is also thoroughly misleading. What actually happened was that early in the 'eighties the young generation, influenced largely from such extraneous sources as Wagner, Poe, and their own school of painting, had come to conceive of a form of expression which should be at one and the same time more intellectual than the Romanticists and more

impalpable than the Parnassiens. Both in substance and in form they aimed at being suggestive, vague and mystical, and at supplanting the scientific spirit and the rigid formulae of the Parnassiens by something which would be more human, more supple and more expansive. They began by formulating their theories and then proceeded to live up to them. They issued periodicals and pamphlets, the *Décadent*, the *Symboliste* and the *Vogue*, in which their theories were explained and in which the practical application of such theories was illustrated by mutual quotation. The school was still in its infancy when Verlaine began to publish the articles which were later to be included in the *Poètes maudits*. His desire was probably merely to write a few critical studies of certain poets of the older generation who had not been appreciated by their contemporaries. The effect of these articles was, however, more important than their intention. But for the insertion of Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, and the omission of Charles Cros, the *Poètes maudits* represents a complete forecast of those who were to become the masters of the new generation—Corbière, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Villiers de l'Isle Adam and Verlaine. This brilliant if unpremeditated essay in criticism elevated Verlaine to a degree of prominence which was from the outset somewhat unnatural to him. He felt instinctively that he was not born to be a " chef d'école " ; he was flattered but a little embarrassed by the adulation with which he was

so suddenly surrounded. Indeed, although Verlaine is in truth the pioneer of much that is most essential in modern French literature, yet his talent was too simple, too instinctive, to be either explained or imitated. He knew that, like Lamartine, he was of the type that is "ignorant, qui ne sait que son âme." He knew that he was quite incapable of explaining either his aims or his methods. He knew, and here was the tragedy, that the vein of genius which had streaked his early life was now petering out; that the mine had been flooded in a lake of absinthe. It was most unfortunate when one had at last achieved appreciation to be expected not only to explain what one had written already, but even to write more in the same manner. These enthusiastic young men were clever enough: it was very intelligent of them to realise the genius which had given birth to the Songs without Words: but it would be pleasanter for all concerned if they would treat both their master and themselves just a little less seriously. It would be pleasanter if they would rest content with sending him their verses, and if, when they came to see him in hospital, they would bring the *Figaro* and the illustrated papers, and perhaps a bottle or two as additional tribute, and expect no more from a tired invalid than a little friendly gossip. It was delightful, of course, and remunerative in its way, to be the accepted augur of a new school, to sit enthroned at the François Premier, and to distribute one's puns and praise to so appreciative an audience.

But all this literature business, all these schools and sub-schools, were a little tiresome ; they were a little difficult to follow.

And thus, although in 1888 Charles Morice was to publish a whole monograph on Verlaine's virtues, the relations between the master and his pupils became, not strained exactly, but a trifle familiar, and the respect of the younger generation glanced off in other directions, towards Mallarmé, who was delicate and tidy, and towards Rimbaud, who was not there.

At first the terms "Decadent" and "Symbolist" had been used almost interchangeably, but gradually the more intellectual writers came to group themselves as Symbolists proper under the white aegis of Mallarmé, while the more energetic looked to Nietzsche, to Schopenhauer, to Ibsen and to Rimbaud. Laforgue and Gustav Kahn, drawing much from Baudelaire and the *Illuminations*, embarked on a delicate journey to the realms respectively of prose-poetry and the "vers libre." René Ghil endeavoured to found a new method on Rimbaud's vowel sonnet, Paterne Berrichon and Gide studied the cult of supernatural moralities, Barrès flung himself enthusiastically into the elaboration of Nietzschean Egoism, while Samain toyed consumptively with the manner of the *Fêtes galantes*. Henri de Régnier, not without a growing if half-hearted sympathy for the Parnassiens, ranged himself in the ranks of the intellectuals proper, and with him Jean Lorrain, the

American Vielé Griffin and Charles Morice concentrated to render the "Symbolists" a serious and reputable school under the leadership not of Verlaine but of Mallarmé. Even Jean Papiadamantopoulos Moréas left the original nucleus and endeavoured, with much shouting, to form a group of his own, with the avowed aim of reconstituting the French language by searching among the antiquities of the Middle Ages.

As a result of all this dislocation Verlaine was left almost alone. Only Stuart Merrill, who had been born at Hampstead and who was also influenced by Pater and Wilde, remained a loyal adherent in the company of Fernand Gregh. Verlaine himself was only slightly irritated by this desertion. It is true, indeed, that his fall from his position of leader was largely his own fault. As I have already stated, he was irritated by the self-importance which the new schools attributed to themselves. He disliked all the classification and labelling which was resorted to; he considered it "German." He annoyed the Symbolists by calling them the "cymbalists"; he alienated others by his mode of life and the poor quality of his later verses: he distressed many by beginning a poem with the words:

> Schopenhauer m'embête un peu
> Malgré son épicuréisme,
> Je ne comprends pas l'anarchisme,
> Je ne fais pas d'Ibsen un dieu;

and finally he hurt the feelings of the remainder by a poem in which he expostulated, rather patron-

isingly, on the folly of the "vers libre." I do not wish to imply that this gradual isolation of Verlaine went very deep. To the end of his life the young generation were to regard him as the author of some of the finest verses in the French language. It was merely that they began to look upon him rather as a psychological curiosity than as a living force. Moréas, it is true, would go about saying that Verlaine was without talent, even that he was "gaga": another poet of this period records sadly that "the intolerable frivolity of M. Verlaine is extremely depressing." But on the whole they accepted him till the end as a remarkable literary figure, if not as a remarkable literary force; and in this, considering the circumstances, they were not unjustified.

2

Throughout this period Verlaine, as has already been indicated, was living in a state of intermittent penury, and the expedients to which he was at times forced to resort from lack of money are not edifying. He wrote begging letters to Lepelletier; he earned the gratitude and consequent hospitality of the Symbolists and the Decadents by profuse dedications and even, on occasions, by equally profuse dedicatory sonnets: at one moment, as we have seen, he sold the same volume to two different publishers: and all the time he scribbled deplorably bad poetry, which he sold at so many centimes per sheet to the cheery but rapacious Léon Vanier.

There is a letter, dated March 1887, which illustrates the depths of poverty to which Verlaine had by then already fallen. "I am thinking," he writes, "of going back to my hospitals. Only I must be respectable, more or less, when I present myself. A pair of socks, after all, and a *possible* hat are necessary to that gloomy landscape." In another letter to Vanier there is a list of what the hospital provided and what the patient was required to supplement: they gave one a shirt, a dressing-gown, a nightcap and a pair of slippers. But what about trousers? Surely Vanier could provide a pair of trousers? Even the modern Villon could scarcely appear at the hospital without his full complement of clothing.

Sometimes his expedients were more rudimentary. There is a picture of him one day arriving at Léon Vanier's and pulling out from his pocket a long prescription which, as he contended, the doctor had just given him. It would cost him at least 20 francs to have this prescription made up; Vanier must advance the money or else the poet whose patronage shed such lustre on No. 19 Quai Saint Michel would disappear for ever from this world of absinthe and capitalists. Vanier would not hear of such a sum; he would give Verlaine 10 francs, but must have three sonnets in return. Verlaine had not got the sonnets, but would write them so soon as he had been to the chemist. He would do more: he would add another chapter to the *Confessions*, but for that

he must have 20 francs and not 10 francs. And so the wrangle would continue, and Vanier would be called a "marchand d'asticots," and Verlaine would be called a drunkard, and finally Vanier's daughter would come in to find the poet beating in rhythmic ferocity with his stick against the floor, and her father hot and furious among his manuscripts. And then a compromise would be effected, and Verlaine would get 17 francs for his chemist. In a minute Verlaine was again genial. Would Vanier come out with him and have an absinthe at the Soleil d'Or? And the prescription? Oh! the prescription wasn't *exactly* a prescription; to tell the truth, it wasn't a prescription at all: as a matter of fact Verlaine had amused himself by composing it that morning.

There is another story of the same nature. Verlaine had succeeded in getting one of his poems accepted by *Art et Critique*, and had obtained for it a five-franc piece from the bureau. Next day he again appeared at the bureau in high indignation, explaining that the money which had been given him had turned out to be a bad piece. The clerk apologised, and gave him another. Having pocketed the new piece Verlaine engaged the clerk in casual conversation and then with a hasty farewell proceeded to leave the building. "But what about the five francs we gave you yesterday?" inquired the clerk. "Oh, that," shouted Verlaine from the doorway, "as I have already so carefully explained, was a *bad* piece. You can't imagine what difficulty I had in disposing of it!"

Such stories could be multiplied without number, and are only too characteristic of the whole period. And Verlaine did not wholly enjoy the position. There is a note sometimes of a certain querulous discontent with his circumstances. "I am not," he wrote in 1890, "a beggar. I am a well-known man of letters, and one who is dying more or less of hunger, and ailing besides, and asking himself all the time what is the good of friendship." Sometimes his helplessness and degradation descended upon him in a mist of despair. He is impotent and alone :

La main droite est bien à ma droite,
L'autre à ma gauche, je suis seul.
Les linges dans la chambre étroite
Prennent des aspects de linceul.

Dehors le vent hurle sans trêve,
Le soir descend insidieux. . . .
Ah ! si ce sont des mains de rêve,
Tant mieux, — ou tant pis, — ou tant mieux !

As early as 1888 his drunkenness had begun to border on dipsomania : by the early 'nineties it had developed into an almost chronic condition. He did not, it is true, have any objection to admitting, and even glorying in, his condition himself. In fact, he wrote at that period the following portrait of the artist as an old man :

Presque un vieillard, presque hystérique
Aux goûts sombres et ruineux,
Évocation chimérique
Des grands types libidineux.

But he resented it bitterly if any one else ventured to say so. When on one occasion he saw

himself described in some paper as a "martyr to absinthe," he became extremely indignant. He wrote to Vanier from hospital:

> I should like it to be made known that I am *not* an absinthe drinker. Any more than I am a pessimist, or a mystic. I am, at bottom, an extremely reputable person, and one who has been reduced to misery by excess of delicacy: a man with some weaknesses, and too good a nature, but from every point of view a "gentleman" and a "hidalgo." Try and get some one to write up an article on these lines.

During the whole of this period Verlaine was to have many different habitations, none of them very respectable and some of them most decidedly the reverse. Sometimes he would find a hotel bedroom on the Boulevard St. Michel; at other times he would live in one room above a restaurant; at others he would move from tenement to tenement dragging with him always his lame leg, his Japanese colour prints, the engravings of his father and mother, and the lamp with the owl's head which lighted his labours. There are few alleys or by-streets in the Quartier Latin and below the shadow of the Pantheon which did not at one time or other hear the matutinal click of his steel-shod stick upon the pavement. He was to live at different times in the rue de la Huchette, the rue Royer Collard, at the still existent Hôtel de Lisbonne, No. 4 rue de Vaugirard, the rue St. Jacques, the Boulevard St. Michel, the rue des Fossés St. Victor. Of all these the Hôtel de Lisbonne, where he had been

admitted owing to the intervention of Maurice Barrès, was the least disreputable and the most comfortable, but on the whole he did not like these squalid and clamorous habitations : on one occasion he sighs :

> Ainsi la chance bourrue
> Qui m'a logé dans la rue
> St. Victor, seize, le veut.

He was glad to escape from them to the glare and smoke of the cafés of his predilection. First among these must always rank the Café François Premier, which was situated in the Boulevard St. Michel, almost directly opposite the railings of the Luxembourg, on the present site of the Gare de Sceaux. Another favourite place was le Café Procope, which still exists in the rue de l'Ancienne Comédie, and another the Soleil d'Or. On occasions he would wander across the river and up to the Hill of Montmartre, and at times even he would visit the Chat Noir, then only at the commencement of its famous career, but attractive to Verlaine owing to the presence there as *chef d'orchestre* of his brother-in-law, Charles de Sivry. Often he would take his meals at the Établissement Viravaud, at 164 rue St. Jacques, the proprietor of which held him in great esteem and was willing to give him almost unlimited credit. More simply sometimes he would dine " à l'enseigne de l'ancien cocher " at the Restaurant Tarlé.

The friends and acquaintances which he made during these years were at least varied. Apart

from the main protagonists in the Symbolist movement there was a heterogeneous company of poets and musicians, of sculptors, artists and journalists. There were young politicians and old strumpets: photographers and acrobats: inn-keepers and foreign tourists. There were Rodin and Madame Rachilde, there were earnest young Americans from Boston, there were Chileans and Greeks, Dutch journalists and English writers; there was M. Poincaré and there was Bibi-la-Purée. The last was an interesting figure, a character out of Charles Louis Philippe or Francis Carco. One day when Verlaine was sitting in his usual rags at a café he felt something fumbling about his knees, and looking down observed a strange and undulating creature busy sewing up the holes in his ulster. This was Bibi-la-Purée. He explained to Verlaine that it was illogical that he, a mere sparrow of the boulevards, should have thread and needle while the greatest of living poets should sit there exposing his tatters to an uncharitable world. Verlaine was touched by this attention and thereafter, much to the fury of his mistresses, took Bibi under his protection, and used him for all manner of strange commissions. He even addressed to him a slight poem which figures in *Dédicaces*:

Bibi-Purée
Type épatant
Et drôle tant!

Quel Dieu te crée
Ce chic, pourtant,
Qui nous agrée,

Pourtant, aussi,
Ta gentillesse,
Notre liesse,
Et ton souci

De l'obligeance,
Notre gaîté,
Ta pauvreté,
Ton opulence ?

There is to-day a slim old man in a bowler hat who flits and spits among the cafés of the Quartier Latin. In winter he sells chestnuts, in spring tulips and in summer delphiniums. He denies indignantly that he is, or ever was, Bibi-la-Purée. He contends that Bibi has been dead many years. He contends also that during his lifetime he was a respectable and talented person; that he was a sculptor; that his works are to be seen to-day in the Museum at Toulouse; and, finally, that he was the "secrétaire particulier de M. Paul Verlaine, notre grand poète." All of which may, of course, be true.

3

Throughout this period Verlaine's literary activity was enormous, and almost completely unfruitful. Although *Amour* constitutes his last work of real literary value, it was by no manner of means the last work that he published. In order to show how his later works were issued in a rush at the end of his life, it will be convenient

to give at the outset a list of all Verlaine's actual publications, remembering that the date of issue does not in the least correspond to that of composition. Thus *Sagesse* which was completed by 1876 was not published till 1881, and *Romances sans paroles*, although privately printed at Sens in 1874, was only published in 1887. Moreover, it was Verlaine's habit in his later works to endeavour to redeem their obvious insufficiencies by disinterring some of the earlier compositions of his manhood. With these reservations the list of his publications is, however, useful enough. I give it as follows :

I. VERSE

1866. Poèmes saturniens. Paris. Lemerre. (Editions by Vanier in 1890 and 1894.)

1867. Les Amies, by "Pablo de Herlagnez." Brussels. (Reprinted in "Parallèlement.)

1869. Fêtes galantes. Paris. Lemerre. (Editions by Vanier, 1886, 1891, 1896, 1899.)

1870. La Bonne Chanson. Paris. Lemerre. (Editions by Vanier in 1891 and 1898.)

1874. Romances sans paroles. Sens. Privately printed. (Published again by Vanier in 1887 and new editions in 1891 and 1899.)

1881. Sagesse. Paris. Palmé. (Re-edited by Vanier, 1889, 1893, 1896, 1899.)

1884. Jadis et naguère. Vanier. (New edition, 1891.)

1888. Amour. Vanier. (New edition, 1892.)

1889. Parallèlement. Vanier. (New edition, 1894.)

1890. Dédicaces. Bibliothèque Artistique et Littéraire. (New edition, 1894.)
Femmes. (Privately printed.)
Hombres. (Privately Printed.)

1891. Bonheur. Vanier.
Chansons pour Elle. Vanier. (New edition, 1899.)
Les Uns et les Autres. Vanier.

1892. Liturgies intimes. Bibliothèque du Saint Graal. (Re-edited by Vanier in 1893.)

1893. Élégies. Vanier.
Odes en son honneur. Vanier.

1894. Dans les limbes. Vanier.
Épigrammes. Bibliothèque Artistique et Littéraire.

II. Prose

1884. Les Poètes maudits. Vanier. (Only Corbière, Rimbaud and Mallarmé. Complete collection re-edited in 1888.)

1886. Louise Leclercq (followed by Madame Aubin, etc.). Vanier.
Les Mémoires d'un veuf. Vanier.

1891. Mes Hôpitaux. Vanier.

1893. Mes Prisons. Vanier.
Quinze jours en Hollande. Vanier. (New edition, 1895.)

1885–1894. Les Hommes d'aujourd'hui. Vanier.
Confessions. Librairie du Fin de Siècle.

III. Posthumous

1896. Chair. Bibliothèque Artistique et Littéraire.
Invectives. Vanier.

1907. Voyage en France par un Français. Messein.

It will be seen from the above that within the last eight years of his life Verlaine published some twenty volumes of prose and verse, whereas in the first forty-four he only published about nine, two of which were suppressed by the police. I do not propose to enter into any detailed examination of these publications of his later years. In the mass they are deplorable, and when, here and there, Verlaine has succeeded in producing something of interest or of value, I have endeavoured to introduce a reference or a quotation in the text of the main narrative. From all this activity it is the prose works perhaps which emerge with least discredit, and sufficient quotation has been made from these prose volumes to give an indication of their quality. His one serious attempt at drama consists of the piece of verse entitled "Les Uns et les Autres," which was produced, not wholly unsuccessfully but without repetition, at the Vaudeville in May 1891. Verlaine was always too lazy to cope with the sustained effort of writing for the stage, and although he often attempted it, he as often abandoned the project after the first few pages. As regards the actual poems of his later life, they are in general but sad attempts to revive the successes of his earlier manner. Thus in *Bonheur* and the *Liturgies intimes*, he has endeavoured with complete failure to renew the stimulus of *Sagesse*, and the said liturgies are perhaps the worst of all his compositions. The collections entitled *Chansons pour Elle, Odes en son*

honneur, *Chair* and *Dans les limbes* are inspired by his two mistresses Eugénie and Philomène, and are some of them frankly pornographic in character. The inspiration of *Élégies* also rises from the same source, but this particular volume is redeemed by one outstanding poem in which his first meeting with Eugénie is admirably recounted :

Oui, c'était par un soir joyeux de cabaret,
Un de ces soirs plutôt trop chauds où l'on dirait
Que le gaz du plafond conspire à notre perte
Avec le vin du zinc, saveur naïve et verte.
On s'amusait beaucoup dans la boutique et on
Entendait des soupirs voisins d'accordéon
Que ponctuaient des pieds frappants presque en cadence
Quand la porte s'ouvrit de la salle de danse
Vomissant tout un flot dont toi, vers où j'étais,
Et de ta voix, qui fait que soudain je me tais
S'il te plaît de donner un ordre péremptoire,
Tu t'écrias : " Dieu, qu'il fait chaud ! Patron, à boire !

Slightly better than the erotic poems are the collections of *Dédicaces* and *Invectives*, which contain some good if casual versification. The former were composed, in some cases in return for a fee, in honour of many of the younger generation, and the latter, which had been written by Verlaine in odd moments of irritation, were published unscrupulously by Vanier after his death.

It is a melancholy fact that the poor quality of these later publications, explained as it was by the disorder of his life, did much to throw a chill over the recognition which he had been so posthumously accorded. For the young generation he became to some extent " le poète dont vous riez " : from the

older generation, from his contemporaries, he obtained a patronising recognition of what he had been rather than of what he was. He began to find his name echoing with a somewhat obituary ring among the literary recollections of the middle-aged. But although they were prepared to write about him with enthusiasm as a corpse, they did nothing to prevent him from becoming one, and at times he is stung to indignation :

Bons camarades de la Presse
Comme aussi de la Poésie,
Fleurs de muflisme et de bassesse,
Élite par quel Dieu choisie,
Par quel Dieu de toute bassesse ?

Confrères mal frères de moi,
Qui m'enterriez presque jadis
Sous tout ce silence — pourquoi ? —
Depuis l'affreux soixante-dix,
Confrères mal frères de moi.

Pourquoi ce silence mal frère
Depuis de si longues années,
Et tout à coup comme en colère,
Tant de clameurs, comme étonnées ?
Pourquoi ce changement mal frère !

Ah, si l'on pouvait m'étouffer
Sous cette pile de journaux
Où mon nom qu'on feint de trouver
Comme on rencontre des cerneaux
Se gonfle à le faire crever !

4

In the earlier sections of this chapter sufficient has been said to give an adequate picture of the

general aspects of Verlaine's life in the Quartier Latin. This picture can be filled in, if desired, from many vivid and admirable sources. There is, for instance, the picture of the Verlaine of the later eighteen-eighties which Anatole France has chosen to introduce into his novel *Le Lys rouge*. Choulette is a perfectly charitable portrait of the Verlaine of the legend; the picture of an untidy lame old man with the eyes of an audacious schoolboy and the mysticism of St. Francis: of an old man, vain and terrible, at moments "puerile, absurd and odious," of a timid and violent old man, preoccupied always with the effect he was producing, keeping carefully in his pocket the greasy manuscripts of recent verses or the more flamboyant letters from his young admirers. The Verlaine of the *Lys rouge* is, however, professedly a caricature, and if Anatole France has dealt lightly with the alcoholic side of Verlaine's life and character, he has made Choulette infinitely more Christian, more mystic and more socialistic than the human original of the Café François Premier. There are other pictures of the Verlaine of these years, and two, particularly, which come to us from English sources. There is the vivid sketch which George Moore has inserted in "Ninon's Table d'Hôte," in *Memoirs of my Dead Life*, and there are a few admirable pages in Gosse's *French Profiles*. In these Mr. Gosse describes how in the company of Henry Harland he visited the Boulevard St. Michel in the early months of 1893, and how for

three days he was caught up in the strange vortex of the Symbolists and the Decadents; how he saw Jean Moréas lording it vociferously at the Restaurant d'Harcourt; and how, so far less *gosse* than his name, he was the recipient of the confidences and good advice of a lady calling herself the Queen of Golconda. On the night of the last day they espied Verlaine's bald head bobbing in the cellar of the Soleil d'Or, and dragged him out, "a timid shambling figure, in a soft black hat, with jerking hands"; after a little persuasion "the passionate shepherd" and Mr. Gosse were sitting side by side at the table, and Verlaine began to show off the clean clothes he had been given for his lecture tour in Belgium, and to speak of Bruges also, and even to recite some of his poems in a "low voice and without gesticulation." Altogether an interesting evening, which Mr. Gosse has recorded with careful and reminiscent delicacy. It was during this time also that a meeting was arranged at the François Premier between Verlaine and Mr. Oscar Wilde. The interview was not a success. Wilde, in the Chelsea French of which he was so proud, let off firework upon firework, the very meanest of which would have set London rocking with laughter. But Verlaine did not hear or understand these acrobatics. His shifty Mongolian eyes were riveted on the splendour of Wilde's cigarette case, on the rows of gold-tipped Bond Street cigarettes which the fluent and affable young Englishman might

really have offered to him—to the pauvre Lélian who could only afford Caporal. The experiment was not repeated, and although Wilde was to record in *De Profundis* that Verlaine's life was the most beautiful in history, he found Verlaine himself too ugly, too lewd, too unappreciative, to be revisited in the flesh.

5

From the year 1886 onwards Verlaine appears to have had a succession of fleeting connexions with all manner of adventitious women. We find among his later poems verses addressed to "C——," to "S——," to "L——," and references to innumerable others. We need not be concerned with these nebulous figures, but by the year 1891 two women had come to dominate him in a manner which was degradingly to affect his life and writings. The first was Esther Boudin, called Philomène; the second was Eugénie Krantz.

Verlaine was in love with both of these women, but he was probably most in love with Esther Boudin. She was in the first place a compatriot, she came from the Ardennes; and she was comparatively gentle, comparatively loyal, comparatively kind. But she had two disadvantages: in the first place she stole his money, and in the second place she was married, or at least "attached," to some one else. So that although he would struggle

from time to time to free himself from the fierce clutches of her rival Eugénie, he would generally relapse after a while under the latter's autocracy. They were neither of them young women: they were neither of them either sober or good-tempered: they were both greedy for money: they were both rather slatternly and dishonest. They are between them responsible for bullying Verlaine into writing endless poems which, in spite of their volume, are but regrettable incidents in his career as a poet. Alternatively to one or the other he would write sonnet after sonnet, and while the ink was still wet these would be taken round to Vanier and exchanged for a few francs of ready money. Eugénie Krantz for her part had been, like the French Republic, "beautiful under the Empire," when she had achieved a certain notoriety as a circus rider under the name of "Nini Mouton," and had basked in the attentions not only of Monsieur Constans, but even of the young Gambetta. With middle age she had dropped her pseudonym and had obtained regular, if more sedentary, employment in the ranks of "La belle Jardinière." She was a woman of much squalor and some character. She was able by sheer persistence and ferocity to keep Verlaine and his earnings almost permanently to herself. She was able also to bring out what was most *canaille* in Verlaine's character, and with a few deft insults could set the home screaming and crashing around their ears. It is no use pretending that their

life together was anything much more than a sad and filthy farce: it is no use denying either that what really separated Verlaine from decent society was the sordid presence of these two voracious callets.

It is tragic through all this to find him still yearning after peace and domesticity. Living with these two women was to exist permanently in a hurricane:

> Tu m'as frappé, c'est ridicule,
> Je t'ai battue et c'est affreux:
> Je m'en répens et tu m'en veux.

They were not even faithful:

> Jusques aux pervers nonchaloirs
> De ces yeux noirs, . . .
> Jusques à votre menterie,
> Bouche fleurie,
> Jusques aux pièges mal tendus,
> Tant attendus.

They were not clean, they were not kind, they were not even intelligent; but they were his own. He would humiliate himself to any degree to retain their affection, or failing that even, their presence:

> S'il arrive que tu me battes,
> Soufflettes, égratignes, tu
> Es le maître dans nos pénates,
> Et moi le cocu, le battu,
>
> —Suis content et vois tout en rose.

What did it matter if his friends, even his younger friends, were shocked, if they told him of the

infidelities of both women, if they pointed out to him the degradation in which he was living. "Let us be scandalous," he cries, "and not worry, and above all, oh above all, don't let us talk literature." We cannot wonder indeed that the younger poets were irritated by the state of abject slavery to which Verlaine was reduced. Their pilgrimages to the oracle were apt to be rendered abortive by these fierce janitresses, or even when admitted to the presence their interview would generally deteriorate into some violent and uncouth altercation between Verlaine and Eugénie. It was sad, also, when one had sent Verlaine one's first volume of poems, when one had been stimulated by the truth and perspicacity of his criticism and his encouragement, to find the same volume next day, and so terribly uncut, upon the parapet of the quays, whither Eugénie would in her little basket bring Verlaine's daily guerdon of homage to swell the jumbled wares of second-hand booksellers. How could they suspect that the appreciative letters which they had received from the master had generally been written and stamped by the less authoritative hand of Léon Vanier?

Of course even for Verlaine there were moments of despair:

> Tu bois, c'est hideux! presque autant que moi.
> Je bois, c'est honteux, presque plus que toi,
> Ce n'est plus ce qu'on appelle une vie. . . .

But the whole situation was not without its compensations: after all it meant a sort of home:

and even if they both despised him, they both needed his money: even if he had no hold on their affections, he could play off the jealousy of the one against that of the other. It meant that for some one, at least, he was, if not indispensable, then quite advantageous; that there would be some one, however mean a thing, for whom his death would leave a gap. And then there was the physical side, not only the purely practical relief which these two women provided for his still orgiac senses, but the derivatory and incidental satisfaction of having some one to fondle. Although this flaccid need for physical relations was to be returned so often with blows and scratches, even they were welcome, even they, in their way, were stimulating. Throughout Verlaine's life he had been obsessed by an almost physical need for dependence which amounted to a natural instinct, —a "filial" instinct as organic to him as the maternal instinct is natural to the young mother. With the deterioration of his middle life, this filial instinct had degenerated into something approaching masochism, and both Philomène and Eugénie ruled and bullied him on this basis.

I have dealt with these two women conjointly since, in type at least, they are identical. Even Verlaine was apt to fuse and to confuse them, and in his letters to Eugénie he would sometimes absent-mindedly allow a "chère Philomène" to slip into the text. I have not dealt, moreover, with them in detail because the subject is neither

pleasant nor interesting. There is one thing about them, however, which it is important to record, namely, that they both used Verlaine as a machine for extracting an almost daily sum from Léon Vanier. It is the latter, really, who should in the first place be blamed for the quality and the quantity of Verlaine's later verses. He must have seen what was happening, and had he possessed any regard for literature or his own reputation, to say nothing of Verlaine's, he should have refused to accept some of these deplorable poems, or at least assured the poet an arrangement by which his productions were paid for by their value rather than by so much a line. It is perhaps unfair to blame Philomène or Eugénie for all these regrettable publications: Eugénie would sit sewing there of an evening, earning her few centimes a day, and it seemed quite natural to her that Paul should also every night write a poem for which Vanier would pay in the morning. It was so easy to write a few uneven lines on a bit of paper: if Paul refused, it meant that he was lazy or sulky; it meant that he deserved a beating. In this way most of the later poems were written under the stimulus of absinthe and the menace of Eugénie's broomstick. Therefore, by all who regard Verlaine as a poet, these final poems can and should be ignored. I do not desire to be unduly hard to Eugénie's memory: she was jealous and brutal: she kept his friends away while he lived and failed to summon them when he was dying: she spent

his money and she ruined what was left of his reputation: but at least she stuck to him till the end, and in the last hours she tended him with a sort of cruel solicitude: and finally, but a few months after Paul himself, she herself died of drink at the Hôpital Cochin. Nor is this all: she had her moments of gentleness: her moments almost of domesticity. The whole episode is not without its lighter shades. There is a Catullus-like poem which Verlaine wrote to her pet greenfinch, and an account of how, when it died, she dropped its corpse into the cellars of the Pantheon. There is his affectionate amusement at her credulity and superstition, at the way she would forecast the future by the dregs of coffee cups, at her passionate interest in the "faits divers" of the morning paper. There is a charming poem which begins:

> Lorsque nous allons chez Vanier
> Dans des buts peu problématiques,
> Tu portes un petit panier
> Moins plein d'objets aromatiques,

and there are endless odes and sonnets which speak of what was, when all allowances are made, a very vivid affection. It is true that the little basket referred to above was destroyed next day in a fit of passion; it is true that a watch she gave him was stamped and crushed underfoot in a similar outburst, but the fact must remain that, on the whole, Verlaine would have been more lonely, more unhappy, more physically filthy, without Philo-

mène or Eugénie to discipline and beat him. It is a curious fact that towards the end he actually contemplated marrying Eugénie. On December 2, 1893, he wrote to her from London:

As for the bracelet, etc., if possible I will do what I can. Do you seriously mean it, about our marrying? If you do, you will have given me the greatest pleasure of my life. We will go and see the Mayor whenever you want. Besides it will be the safest way of securing something permanent for you after my death. Yes, dear, that's all I think about. I love only you and how much!

Here, I live the life of a Pasha—and for nothing, gratis! Terrible dinners, theatres, and music-halls. But it doesn't amuse me in the least, and I'd infinitely rather, incomparably rather, be with my Philomène (sic) even when she's in a bad temper as she is . . . sometimes! I'm not drinking here and I'll never drink again if my darling forbids me. . . .

It is true that three days later he was writing to Philomène asking her to meet him on his arrival at the Gare du Nord, but it is evident that if Eugénie had played her cards better she could have become the second Madame Paul Verlaine.

6

In the early 'nineties the extreme squalor of Verlaine's life in the Quartier Latin began to attract the attention and to disturb the conscience of his Parisian contemporaries. Maurice Barrès had already done his best to secure Verlaine a compara-

tively decent lodging by renting two rooms for him at the Hôtel de Lisbonne. In 1891, however, a benefit performance was arranged for him and for the painter Gauguin at the Vaudeville, at which Verlaine's sketch "Les Uns et les Autres" was performed with such magnificence that the whole "Bénéfice" (his "maléfice" he called it) only brought him 100 francs. With characteristic absence of false shame, Verlaine wrote to the organising committee complaining that the sum of £4 was not much to have resulted from so successful a "bénéfice." They replied that they were sorry, but that the dresses and scenery had really been so expensive; and, after all, Verlaine had had the pleasure of seeing his sketch performed with quite unexampled magnificence. Incidentally also Verlaine spent the whole of these 100 francs in one evening's celebration; an evening on which, less incidentally, he was to meet and love Esther Boudin.

In 1892 began that series of foreign lecture-tours which were not only to bring him substantial remuneration, but to draw the attention of the French public generally to the fact that here was a prophet, who, while not without honour in other countries, was at home allowed to starve in a garret or to suffer in a public hospital. The effect of these foreign journeys upon Verlaine himself was far from negligible. He was given clean clothes, and a first-class railway ticket; he consorted on terms of equality with the leading literary figures in

Holland, Belgium and England: he was treated with respect and even with admiration: and for a few weeks at least he was obliged to remain sober. From all this a faint sunset glow of dignity descended upon his later years.

His first series of lectures were undertaken in Holland, for which country he left early in November 1892, "sinon en vrai souverain, du moins en prince encore très sortable." A special carriage had been reserved for him, and as the train passed through Belgium he lay back in the heavy cushions of his "wagon toilette," enjoying a champagne luncheon which had been brought him at the frontier, and watching with infinite satisfaction the red towers of the gaol of Mons slide past close to his window as his train proceeded to "dévaler dans la plaine."

J'ai revu, quasiment triomphal,
La ville où m'attendaient ces mois d'ombre,
Mon malheur était lors sans rival,
Mes soupirs, qui put compter leur nombre ?
J'ai revu, quasiment triomphal,
Ces murs qu'on avait crus d'oubli sombre.

Le train passait, blanc panache en l'air
Devant la rougeâtre saignante architecture
Où j'eus vécu deux fois un hiver
Et tout un été sans aventure.
Le train passa blanc panache en l'air
Avec moi me carrant en voiture. . . .

Ingrat cœur humain ! mais souviens-toi,
Gentleman improvisé qui files,
Mais souviens-toi donc. Ici la Foi
T'investit loin du péché des villes. . . .

On arrival at the Hague, Verlaine stayed with the painter Zilcken and his wife at the Villa Hélène, and in the evening he gave his first lecture at the Masonic Hall upon modern French literature, upon his own life and poetry, with copious readings from *Sagesse*, and upon the aims and ideals of the Decadents and the Symbolists. In spite of his having swallowed a raw egg which Madame Zilcken had provided, his voice was not sufficiently clear for public speaking. A certain thickness clung to it from many past absinthes, but the lecture appears none the less to have had a "succès de politesse." This first lecture was succeeded by others at Leyden and Amsterdam, and after two weeks' absence Verlaine returned to Paris stimulated and gratified. Early next year he left again for a ten days' tour in Belgium, where he gave lectures at Charleroi, Brussels, Ghent, Liége and Antwerp. There is a legend that on this occasion he delivered a lecture in the actual room where twenty years before he had been condemned to two years' solitary confinement. If this is so, Verlaine has been careful to render but a discreet published reference to such an incident. He merely mentions it as follows:

> It may interest you to know that my fourth lecture at Brussels took place in a criminal court, the lecturer sitting in the seat of the clerk below the judge's throne: the judge *for once* was absent, and around me were some 200 lawyers, "the young bar."

In the late summer of 1893 he again left to lecture at Nancy and Lunéville, and it was his

intention of delivering a further lecture in his native town of Metz. The German authorities, however, interposed their veto upon such a demonstration, and Verlaine, not without some gratification at having been taken so seriously, was obliged to abandon the project.

7

On the 19th of November Verlaine, for the fourth and last time, embarked for England, where, under the auspices of Yorke Powell and Arthur Symons, he was to deliver a series of lectures on Racine, Shakespeare, and the Decadent movement in French literature. The initial credit for this strange expedition falls to William Rothenstein, to the twinkling kindness of William Rothenstein and to his knowledge of what London owed, and was prepared to pay, to Paris in general and to the French Decadents in particular. For William Rothenstein had been living in Paris and had been saddened by the plight of Paul Verlaine; by the bitter gibes which Moréas and others would launch at the head of that so fallen prophet. He had been to see him at the Hôpital Broussais, he had sent him a pipe, he had even given Eugénie a present, and he had foreseen that if Verlaine could limp over to London he would return with pounds sterling and a prospect of more to follow. So he had enveigled Symons about it; and the latter

had readily agreed, had in fact been enthusiastic, and thus, after infinite correspondence, the matter was arranged.

Verlaine crossed by Dieppe and Newhaven and proceeded to Victoria, where he was rescued by Symons. He arrived to find a London exuberantly different from the grim and gritty city which he had known all too well in the 'seventies. It was a London which preened itself on how much, how flamboyantly, it had degenerated since those mid-Victorian days. A London of Wilde and Beardsley, of yellow books and private hansoms, of South African millionaires and professional beauties. A self-conscious London. A London which, even then, was gaping at "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray," and which next year was to become coy over Esther Waters. A London which, stretching burning tentacles down to Merton Street, had seared the twenty summers of Max Beerbohm, and given to Whistler the stimulus of perpetual and chirping youth. A neurasthenic London. A London anxious, as never since, to welcome and to applaud the exotic, the unhealthy and the new. A London, above all, which looked to Verlaine to add a new sensation, to horrify, to shock and to degrade. The lecturer was quite passionately expected to be decadent, to be nebulous, to be excessive, in a word to be "utter." Verlaine was none of these things. It is probable that he failed to observe any difference since 1874. He was dignified, he was serious, he was respectable: he was almost

dull. He spent his time with Arthur Symons in Fountain Court. He was happy there, and he wrote a poem on it in which there is a faint ripple of his old manner:

La Cour de la fontaine est, dans le Temple,
Un coin exquis de ce coin délicat
Du Londres vieux où le jeune avocat
Apprend l'étroite Loi, puis le Droit ample:

Des arbres moins anciens (mais vieux, sans faute)
Que les maisons d'aspect ancien très bien
Et la noire chapelle au plus ancien
Encore galbe, aujourd'hui . . . table d'hôte. . . .

Des moineaux francs picorent joliment
— Car c'est l'hiver — la baie un peu moisie
Sur la branche précaire, et — poésie!
La jeune Anglaise à l'Anglais âgément. . . .

Qu'importe! ils ont raison, et nous aussi,
Symons, d'aimer les vers et la musique
Et tout l'art, et l'argent, mélancolique
D'être si vite envolé, vil souci!

"Et le jet d'eau ride l'humble bassin"
Comme chantait, quand il avait votre âge,
L'auteur de ces vers-ci, débris d'orage,
Ruine, épave, au vague et lent dessin.

While in London, Verlaine was taken to dinners and to music-halls: he was introduced to all that was most "fin de siècle" in that curious vortex. And through it all he was on his best behaviour. He wore a clean shirt and talked with poignant dignity about his wife. But he was a little home-sick, as is shown by his letters to Eugénie and Philomène, and a little thirsty. He wrote from

Fountain Court to Eugénie asking her to marry him, and received a gross and apparently a negative reply. He then wrote to Philomène asking her to meet him at the Gare du Nord on arrival. But of this I have already spoken, and I would add only that on his eventual submission to Eugénie he was at some difficulty to explain what had happened to the money he had got from his English lectures. His replies to her cross-examination were so evasive that she became suspicious. She pestered Rothenstein with inquiries as to whether the money had ever been paid, and he, knowing not of the assignation with Philomène at the Gare du Nord, was at a loss to answer. So they imagined both of them some wild and dissipatory behaviour either in London or, on the way home, at Dieppe.

Verlaine's London lecture was delivered at Barnard's Inn Hall and was quite successful. It brought him £35, and he wrote a poem about it as follows:

Dans ce hall trois fois séculaire,
Sur ce fauteuil dix fois trop grand,
A ce pupitre révérend
Qu'une lampe, vieux cuivre, éclaire,
.
Je conserverai la mémoire
Bien profondément et longtemps
De ces miens sérieux instants
Où j'ai revécu de l'histoire.

From his Soho lodging Verlaine proceeded to Oxford, where he stayed with a somewhat apprehensive Yorke Powell. He was taken round the

colleges and appreciated them immensely. Again he wrote a poem about it,—and not a very good poem :

> Oxford est une ville qui me consola,
> Moi rêvant toujours de ce Moyen Age-là.

He liked Oxford so much that there was some difficulty in getting him to leave. But, as I have said, Yorke Powell, for all the bohemianism of his Long Vacation, was uneasy, and in the end Verlaine only stayed two days. His lecture was delivered in the back room at Blackwell's shop and was not a success. It brought him but a meagre £6. From Oxford he proceeded to Manchester, or rather to Salford, and there, commercially at least, his tour was remunerative to the extent of £20. He returned to Paris and a quite provisional Philomène with £60 and with all kinds of brilliant promises from John Lane and Arthur Symons. There was in the first place to be an anthology of Verlaine's poems issued by the Bodley Head. Then there were to be articles in the *Fortnightly* and the *Savoy*. The former project never came to anything, but the two latter materialised and brought Verlaine some money. He was, however, never fully satisfied as to the extent of the advances which he could wring out of English editors. As time went on he pretended to become seriously annoyed : he began to threaten. " J'ai tant besoin de cette galette," he writes to Rothenstein ; and again later : " Travail fait : corrigé : non payé. Je finirai par me fâcher. Il est des juges à London ?

Mais préférerai money. Harris très gentil. Courtney, naughty boy." Rothenstein would inquire into these alleged defalcations and find them to be untrue; but he maintained contact with Verlaine, and there is a pretty poem in which the latter thanks him for having, on his fifty-first birthday, brought him flowers, Ray Lankester and a bottle of wine. The two last items, however, are not mentioned in the poem.

8

As has already been indicated, the homage paid to Verlaine in foreign countries was not without its result in literary and even in official circles in Paris. It was not that the younger generation failed to appreciate him, in fact on the death of Leconte de Lisle in 1895 he was elected "Prince of poets," but their admiration, however enthusiastic, could not secure for Verlaine a better lodging or more regular subsistence. On his return from England, however, a more organised effort was made to alleviate what was becoming a slur upon the reputation of the Parisian world of letters. The *Figaro* opened a subscription of homage in its columns: the Ministry of Public Instruction accorded him a grant of 500 francs, with a promise of more to come. Verlaine was able to settle into comparatively decent quarters on the third floor of No. 39 rue Descartes. He was not, after all, to

die "in the arms of the Conseil Municipal"; he was to die in the arms of Eugénie Krantz.

The late winter of 1895 found him thus living a life almost of respectability with Eugénie in the rue Descartes. The sums which he was still obtaining from England, from Holland and from Belgium, and which were guarded ferociously, and not unreasonably, by Eugénie against any possible seizure on the part of Philomène, had been swollen by the subscription opened by the *Figaro* and by the grants of the Ministry of Public Instruction. There was a prospect also of a lecture tour in Switzerland. They were now able to afford regular and better food: they were able, even, to provide themselves with a servant-girl, of the name of Zélie. Verlaine was pleased and happy to find something like a home around him: his books and papers were there on the table with the lamp in the shape of an owl's head: on the wall hung the old engravings of his father and mother, the Japanese kakimonos and a few religious prints. There were the canaries, the greenfinch, and two baby carp in a tank. "Notre ménage est dans la joie," he wrote to William Rothenstein. "Nous allons avoir des petits . . . canaris. Et nous nous sommes enrichis d'un aquarium avec deux cyprins dedans." To give colour to the room Verlaine had, as is the custom in the farm-houses of the Ardennes, placed oranges at intervals upon the mantelpiece. One evening Eugénie came home with a bottle of liquid gold paint, and Verlaine spent

happy hours gilding everything, the chairs, the table, his penholders, and even the canary's cage. "I am Midas," he would say to his friends; "whatever I touch turns to gold."

As Christmas approached his arthritis began to gain upon him: his left knee became swollen and painful. He had promised, however, to lunch with Robert de Montesquiou at Foyot's, and insisted on limping out on Christmas morning to keep his engagement. This was Verlaine's last public appearance: the next day he developed bronchial trouble, and his digestive organs refused to function. By January 5, 1896, his condition began to give cause for anxiety: during the night he became feverish with slight accesses of delirium. Eugénie, terrified lest at the last moment Philomène might be summoned, refrained at first, and till it was too late, from warning any of his older friends. On Tuesday the 7th, Verlaine was better, and two young poets came to dinner. He spoke to them of his son, Georges Verlaine, whom he had never seen since his childhood. He had heard that Georges had become a watchmaker—"like Naundorff," he remarked, "every great family has their Naundorff." He showed them two presents he had received from America, a bottle of rum and a lapis-lazuli paper-cutter, both useless to him now. Towards the end of the meal Verlaine began to feel exhausted and returned to bed, where he read the papers, chuckling over the German Emperor's telegram to President Kruger. That night he tried to rise from his bed

but collapsed on the ground: Eugénie attempted to lift him, but was unable to do so, and refrained obstinately from summoning assistance. All night he was obliged to lie on the tiled floor, and the next morning he was so ill that the doctor was summoned. The latter diagnosed diabetes, syphilis, heart disease and bronchitis, to say nothing of the acute arthritic affection of his knee. He at once pronounced Verlaine to be dying. His friends were warned, and a priest was sent for. But they arrived too late. By mid-day he had fallen into a coma, and at 7 P.M. on Wednesday, January the 8th, he died.

9

The news of Verlaine's death spread like wild-fire through the cafés of the Quartier Latin and across the river to the more reputable quarters of the *rive droite*. His intimate friends, Lepelletier, Cazals, Barrès and Mallarmé, hastened at once to the rue Descartes, and there, by the light of one candle, the death-mask, which now hangs in the Carnavalet, was drawn from the tired features of the pauvre Lélian. A committee was formed to arrange for the funeral: Robert de Montesquiou and then Vanier and others, and finally the Ministry of Public Instruction, promised to defray the expenses. The funeral was to be in the nature of an apology, almost of an expiation. From the narrow precincts of the rue Descartes, under the

bright sunshine of that 10th of January, the hearse, rocking under orchids and white lilac, bore Verlaine across the river and through the spacious gaiety of Paris to the huddled quiet of the Batignolles Cemetery. The pall-bearers were Lepelletier, Montesquiou, Barrès, Mendès and Coppée. All who had derided and shunned Verlaine during his lifetime flocked to do him homage at his death: the crowd numbered some 5000 persons. He was buried in the small granite vault which held the ashes of his mother and father.

10

The organisers of this apotheosis had been seriously exercised as to whether or no Eugénie Krantz should be allowed to attend the funeral. In the end the decision, largely owing to the insistence of Maurice Barrès, was given in her favour: she was driven to the cemetery in the company of Madame Rachilde. She stood there by the grave-side, a stout and solitary figure, listening in astonishment to the declamations of Mendès and Coppée, bewildered by all those serious and tidy people, by the orchids and the crowd beyond. Suddenly a flash of comprehension lit her tear-stained features. Flinging herself on her knees she stretched forward towards the coffin. "Paul!" she screamed, "Paul! Ils sont *tous* là."

VII

VERLAINE'S LITERARY POSITION

"Il est fou, dites-vous? Je le crois bien. Et si je doutais qu'il le fût, je déchirerais les pages que je viens d'écrire. Certes il est fou. Mais prenez garde que ce pauvre insensé a créé un art nouveau et qu'il y a quelque chance qu'on dise un jour: C'était le meilleur poète de son temps."

ANATOLE FRANCE.

VII

1

Of all civilised races the French are perhaps the most gifted, as they are certainly the most charming; but they have one basic defect: they have no sense of infinity. They possess, indeed, every quality of the brain and soul; but they possess these qualities in so vivid, so self-realised, so precise a manner that there is no scope for expansion: there are no gradations. Thus they have patriotism but no public spirit, foresight but no vision, wit but no humour, personality but no individualism, discipline but no order. They are logical without being consequent, consistent without being consecutive, generous without being liberal. They have none of our cheerful and blundering intuition. In short, a serious and intellectual nation, who are sometimes efficient and often brilliant, but who cannot proceed except in grooves. In practical and objective affairs, such as the great European War, this peculiar adaptation of the French genius works admirably. In more subjective businesses, such as literature and politics, it is apt to be conventional and short-sighted; it

is apt to think of what it is doing, which, in the realm both of imagination and diplomacy, is generally fatal. It is for this reason that no Frenchman can really understand English literature, just as no Anglo-Saxon can fully appreciate French literature: it is for this reason that it is impossible to translate the one into the other, except in their earliest stages before the two national characters had crystallised: it is for this reason that although we may admire and even love the French, we can never understand them: it is for this reason that although they in their turn can sometimes tolerate us, they can never really forgive us for being what we are.

Above all these secondary aspects of national temperament rises the essential quality of the French genius,—as a glacier, arrogant, lucid and cold. The French mind is above all architectural in character: it is deliberate, cautious, balanced and terribly intent upon the proportions, the stability and the meaning of the business in hand. It repudiates the improvised; almost it repudiates the inspired. It likes not only to know what the creator is aiming at, but to feel quite securely that the creator is himself vividly aware of his own tendencies. It likes the "thèse" and the "school"; it likes programmes, manifestoes, plans, estimates and labels; it likes to measure, to classify and to annotate; it likes to "know where it is." From all this arises that rigid discipline under which French literature prospers

and propagates: there is always the inherited standard, and even the mildest deviation from that standard becomes a heresy, a revolt or a revolution. If the deviation is successful it is called a "movement," which in its turn becomes a doctrine and a "school," with all its canons, its devotees and its eventual heretics: if it is unsuccessful it is either forgotten as a regrettable incident, or if too brilliantly unsuccessful to be ignored is labelled and relegated as "indépendante." The only alternative to the pigeon-hole is the dust-bin.

There is of course another side, or rather another facet, to this process by which French literature is bullied by its public. Unlike ourselves the French are extremely interested in literature. They regard it perfectly seriously: even in the provinces they are not ashamed to be literary. The amount of French books which are every year published about other French books is simply astonishing; it is a national industry, and this of itself creates a standard. It is otherwise with us. In England literature appeals only to the literary,—a quite distinct group of eccentrics. It does not appeal to the public, and the public, in their turn, are perfectly prepared to let it do as it likes. Even the old fierce school of Review criticism, which killed John Keats, has in its turn died a natural death. But literature in France is even more than a national interest, a national duty; it is a definite career, with its hierarchy, its

honours and its distinctions, culminating in a seat and a green uniform in the Academy. A young man in France is quite as definitely a writer as a similar young man with us might be in the Civil Service. It is not only a recognised but a recognisable civic status: it is a profession, and like all professions it has inevitably its shibboleths and its traditions. This spirit of order and convention has eaten deep into the intelligence of the French public. No other race, not even the Romans, would for so long and so glibly have accepted the preposterous dictates of Boileau: no other race would have been so completely taken in by the "bonnet rouge" of Victor Hugo: no other race would have left it to Belgium and Holland, and even to Mr. Arthur Symons, to discover Paul Verlaine.

2

This rigid traditionalism of the French temperament is clearly illustrated in the history of the Romantic and Parnassien movements. The great classical writers of the seventeenth century had set before themselves a perfectly recognisable theory. They aimed at "ideal realities," they wished to "know" and to "think"; they exploited the soul of man as the element in our humanity furthest removed from the animal or the material in nature. Even as the soul was

what differentiated man's ordained function in the universe, so also the higher qualities of the brain lifted him above the frailties and degradation of the brute beast. Their theories were thus at the same time ideal and intellectual: they were exclusive and aristocratic. These clear-cut conceptions were conducted by the great classical writers on the highest plane, and their language, their vocabulary, even their prosody, became sterilised in the process. This spirit and this endeavour persisted throughout the eighteenth century, producing in its course the all-important revolts of Rousseau and Chénier, and losing itself finally in the clouds of the Revolution and the dust and thunder of the Napoleonic era. After twenty years of silence came the great reaction, and on the crest of that reaction the Romantic movement. It is not necessary to state the symptoms and the effects of the sad epidemic which thereafter rent European art and literature. We in England suffered as much as any country; it afflicted us with Scott and Ossian; it robbed us of the great poet which Byron might have become in a wiser and less hectic century; it gave us Capability Brown; it almost, but not quite, succeeded in compromising our Victorians. In France the movement came somewhat later and was even more self-conscious, even more absurd: it induced Théophile Gautier to hit people over the head during the performance of "Hernani" and to sleep throughout Madame Rachel's rendering of "Phèdre": it led

perfectly serious French intellectuals to imagine that they could understand Shakespeare,—and even Goethe: it impeded the full expression of the genius of Lamartine, Vigny and Musset: it ruined a thousand minor intelligences, and it produced Victor Hugo. The latter found himself, indeed, at the cross-roads of French literature. Had he been a greater man he could have stood there as the sign-post to the roads and by-paths of the future. As things were he became a weathercock swinging to the chance breezes of the present. He did not realise this himself: he was blinded by the mists of incense that rose around his exile. "I am the torch," he cries, "it is I, ego Hugo, who have enfranchised the French language." Observe also the arrogance, and, incidentally, the supreme skill, of the following:

Je suis le démagogue horrible et débordé,
Et le dévastateur du vieil A B C D;
Causons.
Quand je sortis du collège, du thème,
Des vers latins, farouche, espèce d'enfant blême
Et grave, au front penchant, aux membres appauvris;
Quand, tâchant de comprendre et de juger, j'ouvris
Les yeux sur la nature et sur l'art, l'idiome,
Peuple et noblesse, était l'image du royaume; . . .
Les syllabes, pas plus que Paris et que Londre,
Ne se mêlaient; . . .
Les mots, bien ou mal nés, vivaient parqués en castes
Les uns, nobles, hantant les Phèdres, les Jocastes,
Les Méropes, ayant le décorum pour loi,
Et montant à Versaille aux carrosses du roi;
Les autres, tas de gueux, drôles patibulaires,
Habitaient les patois: quelques-uns aux galères
Dans l'argot: . . .
Alors, brigand, je vins; je m'écriai: Pourquoi

Ceux-ci toujours devant, ceux-là toujours derrière ? . . .
Et sur les bataillons d'alexandrins carrés,
Je fis souffler un vent révolutionnaire.
Je mis un bonnet rouge au vieux dictionnaire.
Plus de mot sénateur ! plus de mot roturier !
Je fis une tempête au fond de l'encrier, . . .
Et je dis : Pas de mot où l'idée au vol pur
Ne puisse se poser, tout humide d'azur !

All this was very magnificent, but it was not war; it was not even revolution. Hugo did, it is true, popularise the *enjambement*; he did, it is true, dislocate the Alexandrine by giving it three rhythmic beats in place of the old tetrameter of the classics: and finally he did introduce fresh words and syntax into what had become the jargon of French classical literature. But he did not finally enfranchise the French language: he did not establish that the sound of a verse was more important than its lettering; he merely substituted for the old regulations a new set of conventions, scarcely less rigid than their predecessors. By the middle of the century people had begun to realise this; but they did not dare to say so. They realised other things as well: they saw that the French Romantic movement, by placing action and passion above thought and idealism, had incurred great and terrible dangers. The Romanticists had pulled down the columns and metopes of classicism and erected carpenter's gothic in their place. They had become diffuse and hysterical, they wallowed in sentiment and violence, they were melodramatic and illogical. What was worse,

they were untrue, and they were silly; they lacked both conscience and intelligence; they were not even interesting. Something must be done, and done at once, if French literature was to be preserved.

It is a mistake to regard the Parnassien movement as a revolt against Romanticism; it was an attempt, rather, to rescue that movement from premature decay. The Parnassus was inaugurated under the aegis of Théophile Gautier, protagonist in the battles of "Hernani," and bound in homage to the "father," Victor Hugo. The Parnassiens were merely the second generation of Romanticists endeavouring to put their father's home in order, to introduce a saner method into the administration of the estate. The old stage properties were done away with, the rapier, the scarlet cape, the armour and the tapestries were discarded, and a whole new paraphernalia, including the Far East, Egyptian mythology, Buddhism, jade, the South American republics and the condor, were introduced. The formula was no longer passion and excitement; it was meditation and form, it was "art for art's sake." But the Parnassiens, although they brought French literature back to convalescence, did not bring it back to health. They failed to see the essential fallacy of the Romanticists; they saw only the faults which this root-fallacy had created. They were able, it is true, to re-introduce calm and order; they were able to accord to actual intelligence and

beauty the respect which, after all, they merit. But they failed to observe that the basic evil of Romanticism consisted in its unreality; they failed to grasp that what the new generation needed so passionately was truth. And thus they in their turn settled into the grooves which scar so many highways of French literature, and their gospel degenerated into form for the sake of form.

3

It may seem, indeed, a curious phenomenon that both the Romanticists and the Parnassiens, with all that wealth of talent at their disposal, should have failed to secure the complete enfranchisement of the French language, and that this liberation should have been achieved by such comparatively minor figures as Verlaine, Mallarmé and Rimbaud, or, more definitely, by Jean Moréas, Vielé Griffin and G. Kahn. The explanation resides in the inherent conventionality of the French character, in the congenital disaptitudes which have been discussed in the opening pages of this chapter. It is significant indeed that the Symbolist movement, when it came, was conducted to a surprising degree by people who had not inherited these disaptitudes, who were not, that is, of French nationality, or in whom, at least, there was a strong admixture of foreign blood. Thus

both Verlaine and Rimbaud came from the Ardennes and were temperamentally more Belgian than they were French: Moréas was of Greek origin: Vielé Griffin had been born in America: René Ghil was a Belgian, Stuart Merrill was English, Louis Dumur and Rod were Swiss, G. Kahn was a Jew: Laforgue, though of French blood, was born in Montevideo, and even Corbière, Villiers de l'Isle Adam and Mallarmé came from the north, the two former from Brittany, the latter from Sens. These facts are significant in that they go far to explain how the Symbolist movement in France, although both less organised and less equipped than either Romanticism or the Parnassus, was able to achieve more drastic results than either of these two largely abortive experiments. But there are further considerations which lie at the root of Symbolism and which explain its vitality. The standard of the Classics had been thought, the standard of the Romanticists had been sentiment, the standard of the Symbolists was to be sensation: the first worked on a basis of idealism, the second on a basis of action, the third on a basis of suggestion; the one had been architectural, the other pictorial, the last was to draw its inspiration from music; but whereas the Classics had imposed a particular school of architecture, and the Romanticists had followed a particular and vicious conception of painting, the Symbolists, in adopting music as their analogy, gave to it the widest possible application, in the sense of aiming in all

and every form at the impalpable, the suggestive and the intimate. Thus what they lost in concentration they gained in scope, and it is to the wealth of opportunity thereby rendered available that modern French literature really owes its origin and its meaning.

It is beyond the purpose of this monograph to enter into any review of the French literature of to-day. With the exception of Claudel, Gide and perhaps Marcel Proust, it is not as yet of very great importance; but it is comparatively liberated, excessively vital, and pregnant with what at any moment may become a serious literary development. This freedom and vitality are attributable almost wholly to the influence and effects of the Symbolist movement, and if Verlaine's relation to that movement can be defined it will be possible, as by no other method, to establish his general place in the literature of his country.

4

I have shown, or I have endeavoured to show, how successively the Classics, the Romanticists and the Parnassiens became imprisoned in the limitations of their own formulae, and how the Symbolists, partly owing to their strong foreign element, and partly to the more pliant and expansive qualities of their theory, were able to bequeath to the present generation a more living and a more liberal heritage.

How far, therefore, are the specific characteristics of the Symbolist theory to be traced to Paul Verlaine; how far, in other words, can Verlaine be regarded as a pioneer of modern French poetry?

The essential nature of Symbolist poetry has given rise in its day to much intricate and ingenious criticism. The problem of merely how to define Symbolism has by itself produced books of serious length and value, such as Arthur Symons' *Symbolist Movement*, and the works of Kahn, Baju, Beaujon and Barre: by itself this problem has proved the stimulus for endless subtleties, and the vocabulary of many an earnest young man has been strained to breaking-point in the endeavour to capture so elusive a definition. It is perhaps unnecessary to enter into all this. It will be sufficient merely to take the two main characteristics of Symbolism, the basic importance of which even the most expert Symbolist will not contest; the two qualities, that is, of intimacy and suggestion. It is legitimate indeed to contend that the whole of Symbolism is based upon and derives from these two fountain-heads of inspiration. There are, it is true, other elements in Symbolism, but these are in fact but subsequent accretions; they are the quite natural but incidental developments from the original basis of the movement, from the qualities of intimacy and suggestion. The twin galleons which formed the early argosy of the Symbolist adventure were in their course to become freighted with much exotic merchandise. They were to visit

distant horizons and to return enriched with much that was valuable and much that was the reverse. The Symbolists were to "traffic for strange webs with divers merchants"; but for all that their point of departure remains the same; for all that their original debt is owed to the discovery of intimacy and suggestion as two wholly permanent sources of interest and achievement.

It will be said, of course, that these qualities are inherent through all good lyric poetry; that they can be traced in the choruses of Aristophanes, in Catullus, in Villon, in the *Vita Nuova*, in the Sonnets, in Ronsard, and more specifically in de Musset. All this is undeniable, and beside the mark. The point is that the Symbolists were the first to raise what had been an accidental virtue in others to the level of a doctrine for themselves. They were the first to discover and to exploit the two essential qualities which raise true lyric poetry above the level of the merely elegiac. The movement had for long been incubating. There are signs of it as far back as Rousseau, there are indications in Chateaubriand, in Gérard de Nerval and in Goethe. But all this was but half apprehended. Balzac and Baudelaire, the Parnassiens, the Goncourts and Flaubert were all to contribute their quota; the main influences were to come from abroad, in the first place from Wagner, and in the second from Edgar Allan Poe. One hesitates to elaborate or define these influences since such analysis is always apt to be misleading. It is necessary,

however, to explain that in the early 'eighties Symbolism was " in the air." It hung as a summer mist among the hedgerows, it lingered slowly drawn in copse and meadow, and it spread silently and with a strange gentleness across the face of Europe. In France it influenced, not literature alone, but the applied arts also. It inspired much of the method of Rodin and Debussy; it affected deeply Puvis de Chavannes, Gustave Moreau, Carrière and Gauguin. It did not, however, affect the other great painters of the later nineteenth century, since Manet, Renoir and Sisley drew their inspiration rather from naturalism and realism, while Cézanne was guided by a desire to return to classical and simplified methods. It should be remembered, also, that, as compared with the achievements of the French artists of the later nineteenth century, the literary production of the period can claim but a secondary position.

The Symbolist movement stands, therefore, in a vital relation to the French literature of to-day and of to-morrow, and the reason for this abiding influence is to be found in the scope and pliability of the Symbolist method, in the exploitation of suggestion and intimacy. By the year 1885 the Symbolist temperament was already in existence, already tremulous. It needed only a nucleus of coherence, and this nucleus was provided by Paul Verlaine. Verlaine did not invent Symbolism; he certainly did not direct its future development. But he was able at the psychological moment to

catch and reflect the floating aspiration, and to give to it a definite cadence and a form.

5

Even a cursory reading, even the most exclusive anthology of Verlaine's poems, must give a very vivid sense of intimacy, a feeling of a definite and immensely human personality. The methods by which this impression is conveyed are perfectly obvious; they require no very detailed analysis. The intimacy of Verlaine's better poems is no idle exhibitionism. It has nothing in its essence of the tears of de Musset, it has nothing of the vain autobiography of Hugo: it has nothing of Balzac's sense of catalogue. It is more elusive than such essays in revelation. Its effect resides firstly in the sparing and skilful use of attributes, in an apparently incidental but vivid reference to minor objects which for him radiate with emotional significance. It is not that such objects are of themselves of any interest to us, it is not that we are really affected by their relation to Verlaine's emotions; it is simply that our sentiment of association is set vibrating by these references, that a pleasurable chord is struck by the thought of other objects, intimate to us, which have precisely such a connexion in our own experience. The device is one which can be effective only if used with the most skilful precision, if introduced with

consummate musical tact. And it is in this that Verlaine is, at least in his earlier poems, so complete a master.

The instances in which Verlaine employs association, this first device of intimacy, are without number, and in his later poems they multiply and coarsen into triviality. In the verses of his early youth and manhood, however, the device is used but sparingly and with great discretion, and it was through these early poems that he influenced the Symbolists. Sometimes this throb of association will come with a sudden pang in the first line of a poem, sometimes it will be allowed to beat gently through the whole, sometimes, even, its effect will continue in soft pulsations after the poem has been concluded. In all cases Verlaine avoids the trivial by setting the association to some wistful cadence, modulating his line to the exact semitone required. It is difficult to illustrate his method by detached quotation, and I prefer to give the whole of one poem in which his mastery of this device is abundantly illustrated :

APRÈS TROIS ANS

Ayant poussé la porte étroite qui chancelle,
Je me suis promené dans le petit jardin
Qu'éclairait doucement le soleil du matin,
Pailletant chaque fleur d'une humide étincelle.

Rien n'a changé. J'ai tout revu : l'humble tonnelle
De vigne folle avec les chaises de rotin. . . .
Le jet d'eau fait toujours son murmure argentin
Et le vieux tremble sa plainte sempiternelle.

Les roses comme avant palpitent ; comme avant,
Les grands lys orgueilleux se balancent au vent.
Chaque alouette qui va et vient m'est connue.

Même j'ai retrouvé debout la Velléda,
Dont le plâtre s'écaille au bout de l'avenue
— Grêle, parmi l'odeur fade du réséda.

The above poem illustrates perhaps better than any other, Verlaine's use of the device of association. He was to employ this method on many occasions, but seldom with more poignant effect. Scattered throughout his verses we find again and again the throb of such intimacy, whether it be the damp stains on a bedroom wall, the staircase of a suburban station, the hot smell of mignonette among the garden paths, or even the little basket which Eugénie would carry to the market. In all such cases a sudden sense of intimacy is attained by the skilful use of association, by the vivid insertion of inanimate objects, trivial in themselves, but at the same time significant with derived emotions.

The device of association is not, however, the only method by which Verlaine attains to the peculiar intimacy of his manner. He secures a similar effect by the garrulous confidences of his poems, by the way in which he renders the casual moods and habits of his life interesting and emotional. The troubles and pleasures of his daily experience, the rain and the sunshine, some trees shivering in a January wind, the warm feel of a south wall, the rattle of a train at night-time, the

flare of gas-jets at street corners, the music of a merry-go-round, the silence of white walls, the drip of raindrops upon the tiles;—all these are set to plaintive music, are made to become an emotional reality. With the frankness of a child babbling to some stranger of its toys and its relations, Verlaine is convinced that the most trivial events of his experience are tremendously interesting, are of almost cosmic significance. Like Walt Whitman he is imbued with the interest of things, "even the least particle," with the spirituality of things. For him the value of an emotion is not its depth, not even its intensity, but its truth. He knew full well that his peculiar poetic quality was not attuned to the grandiose, he knew that the deeper emotions would always elude him, and he preferred, therefore, to deal with the more incidental sensations, and to reflect in them the passions and tragedies in which his life was involved. In this he was abundantly right: the minor key can convey its message only by the indirect method; in order to be wistful one must above all be elusive. Where Verlaine was to go wrong was in the exaggeration of this manner, and in his later poems he loses all selective faculty; he becomes too garrulous: he becomes a bore. At its best, however, his gift for treating emotionally the casual sensations of the moment is unequalled, and its influence on French poetry was to be immense. Take, for instance, the following as an illustration of what has been above adumbrated:

Le piano que baise une main frêle
Luit dans le soir rose et gris vaguement,
Tandis qu'avec un très léger bruit d'aile
Un air bien vieux, bien faible et bien charmant,
Rôde discret, épuré quasiment,
Par le boudoir longtemps parfumé d'Elle.

Qu'est-ce que c'est que ce berceau soudain
Qui lentement dorlote mon pauvre être ?
Que voudrais-tu de moi, doux chant badin ?
Qu'as-tu voulu, fin refrain incertain
Qui vas tantôt mourir vers la fenêtre
Ouverte un peu sur le petit jardin ?

The above devices are, it is true, but indirect by-paths towards the intimate, and it is perhaps unnecessary to draw attention to the innumerable cases in which this theme is exposed by Verlaine to more direct treatment. At times, indeed, and especially towards the end, he was apt to push his liking for intimacy beyond the limits of taste and prudence. We find him giving his Paris address in poetry, he details his clothes, his food and his drink, he catalogues the charms of Eugénie and Philomène in a manner which is intolerable. But these faults occur in a rush towards the end of his life, and detract but little from his general and more scrupulous handling of the intimate. At moments he uses the direct method with a definite literary effect. In such cases he obtains the impression of intimacy by adopting the tone almost of conversation while being careful to retain the melody of verse. Instances of this can be found in the lines beginning :

Il faut, voyez-vous, nous pardonner les choses,

in which the intimacy of " voyez-vous " is rescued from bathos by the lilt of the verse itself and by the fluid outlines of the concluding two words. But such cases are innumerable and self-evident.

6

An endeavour has been made in the preceding section to show how Verlaine developed the conception of intimacy by exploiting the device of association and by giving a new emotional value to incidental sensations. The methods by which he enriched the element of suggestion and rendered it the main weapon of the Symbolist movement are equally recognisable.

In one of Ruskin's books there is a passage (so far as I recollect, he is discussing the Dutch school of genre pictures) in which he contends that no picture can be really effective without some glimpse of infinity, without some casement opening upon the illimitable, or at least the reflection in mirror or in polished brass of the sky and the open country. The criticism is illuminating in itself and useful as an analogy to the Symbolist conception. Their aim, indeed, was to reveal the infinite, to construct a synthesis which should suggest the whole of man by the whole of art; for them the fatal thing in creation was a sense of finality: the masterpiece should begin only where it appeared to end; it should not merely describe, it should

suggest; it should leave behind it some unexpressed vibration. It is this sense of suggestion, this indication of the unattained, which constitutes Verlaine's chief contribution to the new theory.

He has achieved this effect by different methods. In some poems he reaches it deliberately and with conspicuous craftmanship, by placing the glimpse of infinity in the last line. An obvious instance is the effect of continuity secured by the last verse and especially the last line of the "clair de lune":

> Au calme clair de lune triste et beau,
> Qui fait rêver les oiseaux dans les arbres
> Et sangloter d'extase les jets d'eau,
> Les grands jets d'eau sveltes parmi les marbres.

Here is another poem, not a particularly good poem it is true, but one which illustrates exactly the thesis of Ruskin:

> Murs blancs, toit rouge, c'est l'Auberge fraîche au bord
> Du grand chemin poudreux où le pied brûle et saigne,
> L'Auberge gaie avec le *Bonheur* pour enseigne,
> Vin bleu, pain tendre, et pas besoin de passeport.
>
> Ici l'on fume, ici l'on chante, ici l'on dort.
> L'hôte est un vieux soldat, et l'hôtesse, qui peigne
> Et lave dix marmots roses et pleins de teigne,
> Parle d'amour, de joie et d'aise, et n'a pas tort!
>
> La salle au noir plafond de poutres, aux images
> Violentes, *Maleck Adel* et les *Rois Mages*,
> Vous accueille d'un bon parfum de soupe aux choux.
>
> Entendez-vous? C'est la marmite qu'accompagne
> L'horloge du tic-tac allègre de son pouls.
> Et le fenêtre s'ouvre au loin sur la campagne.

The above is, of course, but a crude instance of his system, and in general Verlaine's manner is to secure the desired effect by far more nebulous methods.

He was aware of his own virtues as of his limitations: he knew that he was a master of the elusive, he knew that, with one stroke of the violin, he could render tremulous what would otherwise have been incidental. He knew better than any other man how to make the most fragile poem vibrate with the unattained. But he knew also, at least in his days of complete mastery he knew, that the arrows of his quiver were but few in number. He felt instinctively that in each poem one arrow alone should soar to the empyrean. And hence his economy, hence the supreme certainty of his method. There are many instances of this. One has only to read the last lines of his published poems in order to see how often he kept his violin for the conclusion. He liked to leave his listeners strung by the echoing pulsation of his final resonance: he liked them to gaze at the arrow climbing to the stars. And in this he was triumphant.

I will take but two instances of this specific knack of his. I will not take any of the more obvious instances, but two lesser-known poems which illustrate this method. In *Amour* there is a picture of Lucien skating. The thing is done in a tone of gentle reminiscence, in a tone almost of affectionate laughter, and then at the end comes

suddenly the thought that Lucien is dead, and with it a sharp cry of agony :

Que serait-il advenu de lui ?
Que sera-t-il advenu de lui ?

Again take a less clamorous incident. It is when Verlaine is in prison. His tower at Mons gave on the railway station, and there is a description of the clatter of trucks and engines : " Vous n'imaginez pas comme cela gazouille," he says, and then the thought of imprisonment comes to stab him and he sighs, " O ces wagons qui vont dévaler dans la plaine."

Such analysis of his method may seem indeed to render it more artificial than it deserves, but in justice to Verlaine it must be admitted that his manner in general lends itself less easily to definition. His power of suggestion does not reside only in such glimpses of the infinite, in the mere skill with which he strikes a vibrant chord in the last verses of his poems. It resides mainly in other elements. It is to be found, for instance, in his somewhat rare moments of reserve, in the way in which he will indicate suffering, not by tears and lamentations, but by some wistful under-statement of his pain. When he says :

Je me souviens
Des jours anciens
Et je pleure,

he says it with an economy of material that is more poignant than all the jeremiads of de

Musset. The agony of imprisonment is better indicated by—

> Cette paisible rumeur-là
> Vient de la ville !

than it is in the whole of *De Profundis*. This intermittent reserve is in itself a powerful element in suggestion. The actual statement which Verlaine allows himself is, as the reader knows at the time, but on the fringe of his real feelings, and behind it stretches a whole region of sentiment, a vast and shadowy hinterland of suffering. What he expresses is but the *symbol* of what he feels.

There is a further medium, and one which he employed abundantly, through which Verlaine was able to suggest the something beyond. It was a constant practice of his to open a poem with a suggestion of exterior conditions through which, by some vague transition, he would explain and illustrate his moods. This method had many advantages. It enabled him to catch the fleeting sensation inspired by some sudden aspect of nature and to modulate his verse accordingly. The human heart was thus fused with the sadness of tree and sky, and infinite scope was thereby given to his rendering. This method he has at times stated quite definitely :

> Combien, ô voyageur, ce paysage blême
> Te mira blême toi-même,
> Et que tristes pleuraient, dans les hautes feuillées,
> Tes espérances noyées !

but generally the analogy between his feelings and

what he describes is left to the imagination or indicated only by the intonation of the verse itself. His use of this medium is extremely effective, as is instanced by the following lines written in a moment of doubt and loneliness:

Dans l'interminable
Ennui de la plaine
La neige incertaine
Luit comme du sable.

Verlaine is indeed always sensitive to the "décor" in which his emotions have been stimulated, and has an unerring gift for indicating natural surroundings in a few vivid words. There is the cold and lonely park of the "Colloque Sentimental," the wild grasses through which rustle the feet of the two lovers, the rain falling on the tiles at Brussels, the clear evening sky above the roof-line of the Prison des Carmes, the flat calm of Lincolnshire.

Sometimes, but more rarely, the process is reversed, and it is nature which gives the antiphon to his heart as in the poem already quoted from the *Bonne Chanson*, in which the gay summer of the Pas de Calais answers his own happiness:

Tourne devers le poête,
Dont les yeux sont pleins d'amour,
— L'alouette
Monte au ciel avec le jour —

or again:

Dans une rue, au cœur d'une ville de rêve,
Ce sera comme quand on a déjà vécu:
Un instant à la fois très vague et très aigu. . . .
O ce soleil parmi la brume qui se lève!

.

Ce sera comme quand on rêve et qu'on s'éveille,
Et que l'on se rendort et que l'on rêve encor
De la même féerie et du même décor,
L'été, dans l'herbe, au bruit moiré d'un vol d'abeille.

7

Such, therefore, was the manner in which Verlaine was able to voice the twin elements of intimacy and suggestion which were to play so large a part in the machinery of Symbolism. His contribution in this respect was vital to the new school, the coherence which he gave to these two doctrines was definitely constructive in quality. His influence, however, was to go further. He was to succeed more than any other man in enfranchising the French speech, and in rendering French prosody the servant of the poet rather than his master.

Monsieur Jean Cocteau, borrowing brilliantly from André Gide, has in one of his more recent publications defined the French language as a piano without pedals. There is some basis for this assertion. The speech of our so serious neighbours is in truth a chilly mechanism, a machine at once dignified and precise. For generations the French have placed lucidity in the forefront of literary virtues; for them precision has become at once an art and a science. In extreme cases, and in France quite mild cases are terribly apt to become extreme, this fetish of precision has

played havoc with their intelligence. The École Normale has pandered to this illusion, and every year a batch of brilliant and energetic young men are let loose upon their docile country, fired with the flames of this insidious and faulty doctrine. And thus for many bright and charming people over there in France it does not matter so much what one says so long as one says it lucidly. In serious or simple matters this ideal is not disadvantageous; but in poetry it hampers and it disconcerts, it leads either to a cold reserve or to a turgid rhetoric; it leads either to sterilisation or unreality. Neither of the so Parisian movements of the Romanticists or the Parnassiens had availed to any permanent extent in overturning this oligarchy of words. It was left to the alien immigration of the Symbolists to achieve the final revolution. It was left largely to Verlaine really to vulgarise the poetic diction of the French. And they, for their part, were never wholly to forgive him.

It must be admitted, indeed, that the vocabulary, the syntax and the versification of Verlaine were the "enfants terribles" of the Parnassien movement. He would insist on using expressions which were often affected, sometimes vulgar and sometimes merely odd: he would insist on twisting his grammar into the most derogatory convolutions: he would insist in playing disrespectfully with the Alexandrine, in wallowing shamelessly in shattered caesura and gaping hiatus: he would

insist in treating the French language as a cheery contemporary and not as an aged and unassailable tradition. His choice of expressions is undoubtedly one of Verlaine's minor assets. Sometimes, but not often, he uses isolated words which are strange and arresting in themselves, and we find "bergamasques" and "Ecbatane" incidentally, as well as the following more deliberate jingle:

> Richepin
> N'est pas le nom d'un turlupin
> Ni d'un marchand de poudre de perlinpinpin,
> C'est le nom d'un bon bougre et d'un gentil copain.

But such instances are not characteristic. Verlaine, who was far from being precious, preferred on the whole to use ordinary and current words and to give them personality by strange attributes or still stranger tricks of syntax and phraseology. In this way one finds expressions such as the following: "soir équivoque d'automne," "La férocité des villes," "délicat et non exclusif," "orchestre emphatique," "les plus mornes jadis," and "un Dante imperceptible et pire." Still more frequently he would twist the logical sequence to illegitimate uses, as in the following extracts: "Le son du cor s'afflige vers les bois": "Des places ivres d'air et de cris d'hirondelles": "Ceint d'un large torchon tricolore ventral": "Impériale puisque Eugénie et très douce."

A more personal trick is perhaps his inveterate use of adverbs, which, in violation of the fundamental principle of French versification, he some-

times places at the end of his line. That he resorts to this with great effect can be shown as follows :

> Le piano que baise une main frêle
> Luit dans le soir rose et gris vaguement,

or again :

> L'allée est sans fin
> Sous le ciel, divin
> D'être pâle ainsi !

or again more daringly :

> Il patinait merveilleusement,
> S'élançant qu'impétueusement !
> R'arrivant si joliment vraiment !

There is a further linguistic habit of Verlaine's which seriously perturbed his contemporaries, namely, his predilection for using foreign words in the midst of his verses. This trick is not always successful, as in his more fluid poems it breaks the flow of the music, but on occasions and when he desires a syncopated effect he can use it well enough :

> Tout l'affreux passé saute, piaule, miaule et glapit
> Dans le brouillard rose et jaune et sale des *Sohos*
> Avec des *indeeds* et des *all rights* et des *haôs*.

All this, to his contemporaries, was to prove infinitely disconcerting, but it must be confessed that one can exaggerate the extent and importance of Verlaine's own innovations in the mere diction of French poetry. In this direction he was to be

equalled and outdistanced by most of the new generation of writers. He figures, indeed, rather as the executant of the new diction than as its inventor, and even in this capacity his function was rather to reconcile the public to the audacities of others than to be particularly audacious himself. His position indeed is one between the extremists and the reactionaries, he was able to popularise and interpret the new vocabulary much as Mr. Nevinson has popularised modern tendencies in painting. He treated the French language as an equal, but he did not, as the others, treat it as an inferior. His originality was to manifest itself less in his diction than in his prosody. And here at least he was to be apocalyptic; here at least he was to become, and to remain, enormously unpopular.

8

I have explained how Verlaine, more than any artist of his period, had exploited the doctrines of intimacy and suggestion: I have explained how he had been able, by giving a new suppleness to French poetic diction, to reconcile the reading public to much that was to follow, and I have qualified his contribution under the latter head by the reservation that in this field he was to be outdistanced by others. He was not as great a man as Mallarmé, his influence to-day is less than that of Rimbaud. He was not as intensely literary

as Laforgue, he had not the energy of Barrès, nor the intellect of André Gide. He was above all personal, and for this reason he stands to some extent in an isolated position. His influence is all-pervading rather than concentrated. He left behind him an atmosphere rather than a doctrine. He is universal rather than particular.

There is one field, however, in which he was quite consciously to innovate. There is one direction in which his place in literary history will, whatever his intrinsic value, be permanently assured. He was the first to restore to French poetry that wide gamut of melody which it had so unfortunately relinquished.

It is perhaps necessary to explain or at least to indicate the basis on which French prosody is constructed. The subject is an intricate one and I shall deal with it only in its broadest outlines. I have already quoted the apophthegm of André Gide to the effect that the French language is a piano without pedals. The truth of this assertion resides in the absence of tonic accent in French, in the avoidance of stress. This characteristic lilt of most languages is easily apprehended. We possess it to a mild degree in English, although, as with German, it becomes apparent chiefly in the dialect forms of the language. In Dutch and in the Scandinavian languages it is more marked, in Russian and Turkish it is unmistakable, while I am told that in Chinese it forms the very essence of the pronunciation. In Persian poetry the whole

rhythm of the verse is based upon the tonic accent, and the rhyme counts for but little in the general music of a line. Even in Italian, even in Spanish the tonic accent is not without its importance. In French, however, the stress of the spoken word is almost entirely absent, and their verse is for this reason obliged to fall back upon balance and rhyme. In other words, the rhythm of verse is attained not by the ebb and sway of the spoken language, but by the artificial orchestration of prosody. It is merely the intrinsic beauty of the French language which has prevented this system from becoming gravely defective: it had not, however, until Verlaine's arrival, prevented it from becoming monotonous. There is a further, and a somewhat curious, circumstance which explains the wide gap which exists between French poetic diction and the spoken language. In old French the "e muet" was, as in Chaucerian English, accorded a definite syllabic pronunciation, and the ancient French metres, as the Chaucerian stanza, were constructed accordingly. Quite early, however, the final and unaccented "e-sounds" in French became aphonous, but the metrical convention was not modified concurrently with this development. There thus resulted inevitably a basic divergence between the pronunciation of prose and verse, a divergence which goes far to explain the apparent artificiality of French poetic diction, and the elaborate expedients by which their stanzas are made to scan. As a result the

technique of most French verse has become so elaborate that it has to be learnt before it can be apprehended. This is not the case with Verlaine, who violated the technique of French prosody in his desire to express the music of the French language; and the French, who have been at infinite pains to master this technique, are apt for this reason to resent him as a charlatan.

So long ago as the twelfth century Alexandre de Bernay had invented the French hexameter, or Alexandrine, and this verse was gradually to become the favourite form of French metrical expression. The reason for this is obvious: it is only a long verse to which the rigid rules of prosody can be applied with musical effect, can have sufficient scope to give, at the conclusion, a gratifying sense of intricate achievement. In shorter lines the actual craftmanship of the metre is less stimulating, and the absence of a phonetic cadence more apparent. It was thus on the basis of the Alexandrine that the French prosody of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was elaborated, and that rules were invented which were so weighty as to crush the shorter stanzas almost out of existence. It was thus that the caesura or break at the end of the sixth foot was insisted on: that elaborate regulations were enforced for coping with the problems of diphthongs and the "e muet": that the hiatus, or juxtaposition of two unelided vowel-sounds was condemned; and that the alternation of

"masculine" and "feminine" rhymes was introduced. Moreover, each verse was so to speak to be self-contained, and the construction of one line could not be carried on into the next. The monotony which resulted from this rigid discipline was appalling. It appalled even the French. The metrical language was becoming further and further divorced from the speech of current usage, and even the magnificent example of La Fontaine could do little to redeem it. With the coming of Victor Hugo the matter took on a different complexion. I have already indicated that even Hugo did not really enfranchise French verse from the dictatorship of its own prosody. It is true that he displaced the caesura, it is true that he introduced the "enjambement," that he enabled the construction of one line to overflow into the next: it is true also that in the "Légende des siècles" he erected a monument to a variety of forgotten French metres; but in all this he merely widened the investing circle of prosody, he did not pierce it. The Parnassiens when they came were in this respect, and under the influence of de Banville, to prove reactionary. Théodore de Banville had been endowed with an exceptional talent for rhyme, and he exploited this gift to the dignity of a poetical doctrine. While admitting the displacement of the caesura, and the "enjambement," he insisted that the essence of French poetry resided in the rhyme. He defined the art of writing verse as the capacity for rhyming, and he

characterised the essential poetic quality and method as an intuition for rhyme, as an intuition by which one word would present itself instinctively in the company of its own antiphon, the remaining words of a verse falling into line obediently behind the essential "bouts rimés." He went further. He contended that a rhyme was merely an assonance unless supported by the "consonne d'appui," the consonant, that is, which comes immediately before the vowel-sound of a rhyme. "Sans consonne d'appui," he writes, "pas de Rime et, par conséquent, pas de poésie."

The result of all this was that by the time Verlaine arrived on the scene French metrics were labouring under two separate tyrannies, the first representing what remained of the old pre-Hugo doctrines, the second centering in the essential importance of rhyme. The disadvantages of the latter doctrine are obvious. It made for monotony. It crippled the free use of terminal words by the limitations of the "consonne d'appui." It laid a perfectly artificial stress and importance on the last words of each line, and thereby rendered it impossible to express gradations of feeling or to change the melody of a single poem without at the same time altering the key.

Verlaine, with his sensitive ear for music, felt these limitations instinctively. He determined to free French verse from the distressing monotony which menaced it, and he was able, while not denaturalising the essential quality of the language,

to introduce a new and sensitive method by which the slightest tremor of feeling could be registered and expressed. So early as 1872 when he was in London with Rimbaud he was to embody his theory in an admirable poem which at once explains and illustrates his manner :

De la musique avant toute chose,
Et pour cela préfère l'impair,
Plus vague et plus soluble dans l'air,
Sans rien en lui qui pèse ou qui pose.

Il faut aussi que tu n'ailles point
Choisir tes mots sans quelque méprise :
Rien de plus cher que la chanson grise
Où l'Indécis au Précis se joint.

C'est des beaux yeux derrière des voiles,
C'est le grand jour tremblant de midi,
C'est, par un ciel d'automne attiédi,
Le bleu fouillis des claires étoiles !

Car nous voulons la Nuance encor,
Pas la Couleur, rien que la nuance !
Oh ! la nuance seule fiance
Le rêve au rêve et la flûte au cor !

Fuis du plus loin la Pointe assassine,
L'Esprit cruel et le Rire impur,
Qui font pleurer les yeux de l'Azur,
Et tout cet ail de basse cuisine !

Prends l'éloquence et tords lui son cou !
Tu feras bien, en train d'énergie,
De rendre un peu la Rime assagie.
Si l'on n'y veille, elle ira jusqu'où ?

O qui dira les torts de la Rime !
Quel enfant sourd ou quel nègre fou
Nous a forgé ce bijou d'un sou
Qui sonne creux et faux sous la lime ?

De la musique encore et toujours !
Que ton vers soit la chose envolée
Qu'on sent qui fuit d'une âme en allée
Vers d'autres cieux à d'autres amours,

Que ton vers soit la bonne aventure
Éparse au vent crispé du matin
Qui va fleurant la menthe et le thym . . .
Et tout le reste est littérature.

The above poem states and illustrates Verlaine's theories better than any analysis. The flow of the metre is relaxed or tightened to follow exactly the shades of meaning which run through the poem. The stress falls naturally upon the important or the beautiful word, and not, as under de Banville's system, only on the words which happen to carry the rhyme. The first line opens in that gentle undertone which is the motif of Verlaine's better verses, but in the second stanza the beat of the verse is checked and then again released, while in the third, with the expansion of imaginative diction, the melody is allowed to slide onward for four verses, only to be caught up again and broken by the "Car nous voulons" of the fourth stanza, and by the early stress of the twelve lines that follow. In the seventh stanza the time again changes into a jingling syncopation, interrupted by short words and assonances indicative of the barbarity of rhyme, while in the last two stanzas the flow begins again, to be cut off abruptly in the final line with a petulant sweep of dismissal.

The prosody of Verlaine is indeed an interesting subject, but it is one which a foreigner can only

approach with diffidence. To a foreign ear the poetry of Verlaine is without a doubt the most musical in the French language. It is not so for all his compatriots. For many a cultured Frenchman Verlaine only wrote one verse of complete metrical perfection, namely :

> Il pleure dans mon cœur,
> Comme il pleut sur la ville,

and even in this instance their appreciation is probably due to an impression that the two lines are one Alexandrine broken by the ordained caesura. Even, however, if we discount much of this apparent obtuseness of the French ear by attributing it to the inherent conventionality of the French character, to the unfortunate extent to which they are taught their own literature at school, the fact must remain that the French language after all is their business and not ours. An Englishman, however well he may know French, is apt to read Verlaine's poems with a more decided lilt than would a Frenchman. Take for instance the beautiful poem in which Verlaine sends *Sagesse* as a peace-offering to his wife. A foreigner, even a Swiss or a Belgian, will begin in a monotonous undertone, stressing only the words which I have put in italics :

> Écoutez la chanson bien *douce*
> Qui ne *pleure* que pour vous *plaire.*

But ask an averagely educated Frenchman to read

the poem and he will be apt to lay a slight stress on " Écoutez " and to stumble over the assonance of " pleure " and " plaire." What I have indicated occurs, if not invariably, at least with sufficient frequency to cause one some bewilderment. Does it mean that the foreign ear catches a deliberate intonation in Verlaine's poems to which the French ear is not attuned ? Or does it mean, simply, that we, with our habit of a tonic accent, actually mispronounce the verses, and that we read into them a melody which Verlaine himself had not intended ? The truth lies probably between the two. Those who remember hearing Verlaine recite his own poetry recount how he would slide silently into the first verse, and continue in a gentle undertone, his hand swaying mildly to the cadences of the language, and his purring voice rising but a few semitones here and there to break the monotony. This is far from the traditional, the emphatic, method of French recitation, with its so symmetrical and recurrent cadence, with the caesuras and the rhymes crackling together as by metronome. Surely, therefore, if Verlaine's method of recitation was so alien to French habits, we are justified in assuming that his conception of his own music was distinct from that which is realised by the majority of his compatriots ? Surely if we foreigners instinctively catch the intonation which he himself adopted, we can claim at least to comprehend the essential aspects of his peculiar melody ?

9

In his work on Verlaine, Ernest Delahaye has given an elaborate analysis of the poet's metrical system. He has explained the metres and the prosody, the rhymes and the assonances, the flux and reflux of Verlaine's so fluid diction. He has seen, and demonstrated, clearly how Verlaine was able to subordinate his verse to the emotions or the significance of the moment, and to enfranchise it from the limits of a stereotyped prosody. He has illustrated by numerous and well-chosen quotations the quality of Verlaine's rhyme-system, and has invented for the purpose the expression "rime nuancée." He has examined Verlaine's use, and has criticised his abuse, of the "enjambement": he has dealt with his deferred solutions, his employment of the "vers boiteux," his pliable treatment of the Alexandrine: he has referred, but without the necessary emphasis, to Verlaine's deliberate employment of the hiatus, and to the so characteristic manner in which he would destroy the force of his rhyme-endings by introducing false rhymes and assonances into the body of the line. All this Delahaye has demonstrated with extreme lucidity and with the assurance of one who had himself written verses and who was expert in its dangers and intricacies. But he has failed to draw the obvious inferences from the material which he has accumulated; he has failed to show

that not only did Verlaine violate the prosody of the older generation, but that he initiated the processes of the new literature which has since developed. Verlaine's contribution in this direction amounted really to this, that he was the first to understand that Victor Hugo and his successors had merely dethroned the hemistich to raise in its place the autocracy of rhyme, and that the meaning and scope of a verse would be equally impeded by the enforced stress of the concluding rhyme, as it had been curtailed by the tyranny of the caesura. His object, indeed, was not to abolish rhyme, but to render it "sensible." His main contribution, therefore, was to introduce a system of rhymes which should be strong when concordant with the sense of the verse, but which, when they conflicted with logical expression, should be so modulated as to become almost imperceptible.

All this is important, and indeed vital, as explaining Verlaine's influence upon his contemporaries and his successors, but it does not explain why, even to a foreign ear, his poetry has so personal a cadence, or why it is that his melody is so exactly suited to his own temperament and to the whole range of secondary lyricism. To a large extent, of course, the intense personality of Verlaine's style is due to elements which must escape analysis as they have, even in the works of Fernand Gregh, eluded imitation. But in some minor details of style and prosody it is possible to

add to what has already been said by giving certain supplementary suggestions. The essence of Verlaine's style is its gentleness, or, as his detractors would say, its effeminacy. He secures this effect by the profuse employment of labial consonants, and broad vowels, and by the avoidance of all dentals, sibilants or closed vowel-sounds. Verlaine, to a greater degree than other lyric poets, had a predilection for the alliteration or alternation of "l," "m," "n" and "r," and the tune of his most characteristic poems is based on the interchange of these weak and fluid consonants :

La lune blanche
Luit dans les bois ;
De chaque branche
Part une voix
Sous la ramée. . .

O bien-aimée.

L'étang reflète,
Profond miroir,
La silhouette
Du saule noir
Où le vent pleure. . .

Rêvons : c'est l'heure.

The extent to which the avoidance of all masculine sounds was the basis of Verlaine's poetic diction, can be emphasised by the process of analogy. Take for instance the first verses of a well-known poem of de Musset, which, although in sentiment completely analogous to many of Verlaine's poems, could never, owing to the inclusion of closed vowels

and hard consonants, be attributed to the author of *La Bonne Chanson*. The verses in question run as follows :

J'ai perdu ma force et ma vie
Et mes amis et ma gaieté ;
J'ai perdu jusqu'à la fierté
Qui faisait croire à mon génie.

Quand j'ai connu la verité,
J'ai cru que c'était une amie ;
Quand je l'ai comprise et sentie,
J'en étais déjà dégoûté.

There was another and even more obvious method by which Verlaine secured the characteristic gentleness of his verse, namely, by his use of feminine rhymes. The rules of French prosody divide, as is well known, all rhymes into either "masculine" or "feminine." Masculine rhymes are those which end with the syllable which contains the tonic vowel : feminine rhymes are those in which the rhyme-syllable is followed by another containing an "e muet." The rule is that the masculine and feminine rhymes should alternate throughout the verse, and this rule, until Verlaine's day, was rarely violated. In some of his more plaintive poems, however, Verlaine has deliberately omitted the masculine couplets and based the whole structure on a feminine sequence, as in the following :

Je devine, à travers un murmure,
Le contour subtil des voix anciennes
Et dans les lueurs musiciennes,
Amour pâle, une aurore future ?

Et mon âme et mon cœur en délires
Ne sont plus qu'une espèce d'œil double
Où tremblote, à travers un jour trouble,
L'ariette, hélas ! de toutes lyres !

O mourir de cette mort seulette
Que s'en vont, cher amour qui t'épleures,
Balançant jeunes et vieilles heures !
O mourir de cette escarpolette !

Nor is this all. Even in those poems where he abides by the rule and alternates his masculine with his feminine couplets he is able, by the unsparing use of labials, to render his masculine rhymes as epicene as possible, to render them indeed almost hermaphroditic. The effect obtained is one of fluid simplicity and of plaintive impotence, and that, after all, was the effect which he himself desired.

10

The above suggestions have been tendered for the purpose of showing how some even of the more elusive elements in Verlaine's style can be labelled and dissected. The process might, indeed, be pushed further. An analysis might be given of the intonation of Verlaine's better verses, of the cumulative effect by which he attains to his deferred solutions. Comparisons might be drawn from the works of Heine, from those of Edgar Allan Poe, and even from "The Shropshire Lad," and an indication could be given of the similarity of

effect which exists between the French feminine rhyme and the penultimate stress so often found, as in "Ulalume," in the English lyrics of the minor key. I doubt, however, whether such an examination would in practice be very illuminating. I doubt whether it is desirable any further to botanise upon the poet's grave. Verlaine's verses, in their shrouded music, can be appreciated instinctively and without elaboration. Some technical dissection is necessary, of course, if only to disprove the school of criticism which accuses him of ignorance and clumsiness; but the vital essence of his lyrical powers will inevitably elude analysis. It will always remain intuitive in that it was so sincere.

Such was the work and such the life of Paul Verlaine. I have come to a conclusion, and yet I hesitate to conclude. I have endeavoured to furnish a definite, it may be merely a particular, aspect of the works and life of Paul Verlaine. I have endeavoured to do this with sympathy and with that degree of reverence which he would himself have desired. And at the end I am left with one impression only: an impression of disquiet. Is it the elusiveness of the man which leaves behind it this vibration? Is it merely his wistfulness which disconcerts? There are some, of course, who will be privileged readily to dismiss Verlaine as a degenerate whose antics can have but little relation to the complexities of normal life. Many will read into his life-story a warning

against the palpable consequences of moral frailty. To many the thing will appear as little more than a reflexion of what they have always, with no little hostility, conceived as being the artistic temperament. Others again will welcome his life and works as constituting a peculiarly vivid specimen for the indulgence of sexual psychology. A few, and to these I render sincere apology, will healthily resent this tampering with an idealised if scarcely apprehended poet.

And there will be others again for whom it will not be easy to fit their impressions into any of these facile categories; who will be left with the stirrings of an uneasy surmise that here was a case to which the conventions of ordered society cannot be applied, or can be applied only with a resultant pang of injustice and incompleteness. For them the life of Verlaine, weak and squalid as it was, will none the less have its facets of beauty: for them his character will be redeemed by its simplicity, and his life justified as being a protest, an unwilling but adventurous protest, against the complacent autocracies of convention and success.

The quality of Paul Verlaine is not a noble quality; it is not, perhaps, very inspiring. Affable always, courageous sometimes, and so feebly human, he reflects little that is not transitory, he represents much that will always be condemned. The new generation which is now arising in France, a generation dumb as yet, hard and mysterious, but undeniably different, may render little honour

to Paul Verlaine. They are less intellectual than their predecessors. It may be that they will be more intelligent. It is quite possible that they will give no thought to poetry.

But for those who have lived before the war the spirit of Paul Verlaine will for long be merged with that of the fair city which he loved so fatally. For them his spirit will still limp and linger in boulevard and alley, in book shop and in tavern: or along those quays whose jumbled outlines glitter in the gay and gentle river as it slides with garbaged waters past church, past prison and past charnel-house; and so, through soft French meadows, to the sea.

Nov. 21, 1920.

THE END

Printed in Great Britain by R. & R. CLARK, LIMITED, *Edinburgh.*